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GEORGE SAND'S NOVELS

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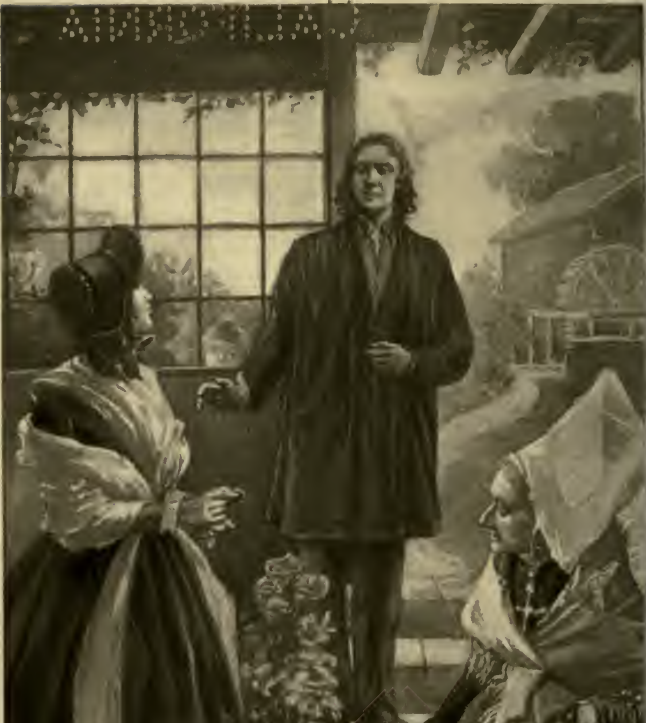
THE MILLER OF ANGIBAULT



THE MILLER OF ANGIBAULT

BY

GEORGE SAND

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

ONE hour after midnight rang from St. Thomas d'Aquin, as a dark, slender figure rapidly glided beneath the high and shadowy wall of one of the fine gardens still found in Paris, on the left bank of the Seine. The night was warm and serene. A delicate fragrance breathed from the flowering daturas, which stood in the light of the full moon like tall, white spectres. There was an air of ancient splendor about the broad flight of steps leading up to the Hotel de Blanchemont; and the apparent opulence of the mansion, dark and silent as it now rose against the moonlight, was enhanced by the extent and beauty of the surrounding garden.

But the brilliant moonlight was not quite agreeable to the young woman in mourning, who took her way, by the darkest alleys, to a little door placed at the extremity of the wall. Nevertheless, she went resolutely on, for it was not the first time she had risked her reputation for the sake of a love, always pure, and henceforth legitimate,—she had been a widow now for a month.

She took advantage of a shadowing clump of acacias to reach, unperceived, the little private door, which opened on a narrow and unfrequented street. Almost at the same moment the door turned on its hinges, and the person she had summoned entered softly, and followed his mistress, in silence, to a small summer-house. But, as soon as the door was closed, the young baroness of

Blanchemont, from instinctive modesty, taking from her pocket a pretty little Russia leather box, drew a match, and lighted a candle, which seemed to have been hidden beforehand in a corner, while the young man, in a simple, timid, and respectful manner, assisted her in dispelling the darkness of the room. He was so happy to see her again!

The summer-house was closed with large wooden shutters. It may have been the voluptuous retreat of some marquise of the old régime; but the only furniture and light left to the now deserted boudoir consisted of a rustic bench, a few empty boxes, some gardening tools, and the little taper, with no better candlestick than a broken flower-pot.

Marcelle, the fair descendant of its former occupants, was dressed with the simplicity and decorum befitting a modest widow. Her only ornament was the beautiful golden hair, which fell over her black crape collar. But for the delicacy of her alabaster hands, and of her satin-slippered foot, which alone betrayed her aristocratic habits, she might have been taken for the natural companion, in rank, of the man now kneeling by her side — for a Parisian grisette. There are grisettes with brows of queenly dignity and of saintly grace.

Henri Lemor had an agreeable face, but intelligent and striking rather than handsome. It was dark and pale, and shadowed by abundant black hair. It was easy to see that he was a true Parisian — strong through will, delicate by organization. His dress, neat and modest, betokened humble circumstances; his ill-tied cravat showed an entire absence of foppery, or habitual preoccupation of mind; his brown gloves were enough to prove that he was not, as the Blanchemont servants would have phrased it, a "suitable" man to be the lover or husband of their lady.

These two young people, scarcely older the one than the other, had more than once held tender interviews in the summer-house during the mysterious hours of night; but within a month, that they had not met, deep anxiety had darkened the romance of their love. Henri Lemor was dismayed and trembling; Marcelle de Blanchemont seemed frozen with fear. He knelt before her as if to thank her for having granted him a last meeting; but he soon rose without speaking, and his manner was constrained, and almost cold.

"At last!" she made an effort to say, and reached him her hand. He carried it to his lips with a convulsive movement, but no gleam of joy appeared upon his countenance.

"He loves me no more," thought she, pressing both her hands upon her eyes; and she remained mute, and stiffened with dread.

"*At last?*" repeated Lemor. "Is it not *so soon* that you would say? I ought to have had strength to wait longer. It was wanting — forgive me!"

"I do not understand you," said the young widow, letting her hands fall dejectedly.

Lemor saw her tearful eyes, and mistook the cause of her emotion.

"Oh yes!" he resumed; "I am to blame; I see, by your grief, the remorse I cause you. These four weeks have seemed to me so long, that I had not the courage to tell myself they were too few! Yet I had scarcely written to you this morning to ask leave to see you, when I repented. I blushed for my own cowardice, I reproached myself for the scruples of conscience I was forcing you to stifle; and when I received your calm, sweet answer, I saw that you recalled me from pity alone."

"Oh, Henri, how you pain me by speaking so! Is it jest, or pretext? Why ask to see me, if you return with so little happiness and confidence?"

The young man started, and throwing himself again at her feet —

"I had rather meet your pride and your reproaches," cried he; "your kindness kills me!"

"Henri! Henri!" cried Marcelle, "you have, then, been false to me? Oh, you do look guilty! You have forgotten me, or slighted me — I see it too well!"

"Neither, neither; to my eternal grief, I revere you, I adore you, I believe in you as I do in God — I love only you on this earth!"

"Ah, well then!" said the young woman, throwing her arms around the poor fellow's dark head, "it is not so great a misfortune to love me thus, since I love you in the same way. Listen, Henri! I am now free, and I have nothing with which to reproach myself. So little did I desire the death of my husband, that I have never permitted myself to imagine what I would do with my liberty, were it restored to me. You know we have never spoken of this, you knew that I loved you passionately, and yet this is the first time that I have uttered it! But how pale you are, my friend! your hands are icy — you seem in great pain! You frighten me!"

"No, no! speak on, speak on!" answered Lemor, yielding to the force of emotions at once most sweet and distressing.

"Well!" continued Mme. de Blanchemont, "it is impossible for me to feel the conscientious scruples and distress which you dread for me. When the bloody corpse of my husband, killed in a duel for another woman, was brought to me, I own that I was struck with horror and consternation; I believed it my duty, when sending you the terrible news, to bid you remain for a certain time absent from me; oh, if it were a crime to feel that time very long, I have been sufficiently punished by your scrupulous obedience! But during this month of seclusion, while I have been occupied solely with the care of my boy, and with doing my utmost to console M. de Blanchemont's parents, I have carefully examined my heart, and I do not find it guilty. I could not love that man. He never loved me; and all that I could do was to respect his honor. Now, Henri, I owe nothing to his memory, but an external respect to decorum. I must see you in secret, and seldom, till the end of my mourning; but in a year, in two years, if necessary —"

"Well, Marcelle! in two years?"

"You ask me what we shall be to one another, Henri? You love me no longer — I told you so!"

Henri deserved this reproach too little to be moved by it. Anxiously attentive to every word of his mistress, he entreated her to continue.

"Well," she resumed, blushing like a young girl, "do you not wish to marry me then, Henri?"

Henri let his head sink upon Marcelle's lap, and remained several moments as if overpowered by joy and gratitude; but he rose abruptly, with a look of the deepest despair.

"Has not your experience of marriage been sad enough?" said he, almost harshly. "Would you place yourself again under the yoke?"

"You frighten me," said Mme. de Blanchemont, after a moment of silent terror. "Are you conscious of tyrannical instincts, or is it for yourself that you dread the yoke of eternal fidelity?"

"No no! it is nothing of the sort," replied Lemor, in a dejected manner. "What I dread, what I cannot endure for myself or for you, you know; but you will not—you cannot understand it. Yet we have often spoken of it, before we imagined that such discussions were ever to interest us personally, or could contain for me the sentence of life or death!"

"Is it possible, Henri, that you carry fanaticism so far? What! cannot even love conquer it? Ah! you men, how little do you love!" added she, with a heavy sigh. "When it is not vice that hardens your souls, it is virtue; and whether base or noble, you love nothing but yourselves."

"Listen, Marcelle! if I had asked you a month ago to fail in your duty, if my love had implored what your religion and your principles would have made you consider a great and irreparable fault—"

"You did not ask me," said Marcelle, blushing.

"I loved you too well to ask you to suffer and weep for me. But if I had, Marcelle?"

"It is an inconsiderate question," said she, endeavoring, with amiable coquetry, to elude a reply.

Her grace and beauty stirred Lemor's blood. He clasped her passionately to his heart; but instantly repressing his excitement, he left her, and walking hurriedly to and fro behind the bench on which she was seated, said in an altered voice:

"And if I asked of you now this sacrifice, which your husband's death would certainly render less terrible—less alarming—"

Mme. de Blanchemont was again pale and serious.

"Henri," she replied, "I should be offended and wounded to my heart's core by such a thought, when I have just offered you my hand, and you seem to refuse it."

"I am indeed unhappy that I cannot make myself understood, and am taken for a villain, when I feel within me the very heroism of love!" answered he, bitterly. "You think the phrase ambitious, and are ready to smile with pity. Nevertheless it is true, and God knows my agony—it is fierce, it passes my courage!—"

And Henri burst into tears.

The young man's grief was so deep and unfeigned, as to terrify Mme. de Blanchemont. These burning tears seemed like an invincible refusal of happiness, like an eternal farewell to all the illusions of youth and love.

"Oh, my dear Henri!" cried Marcelle, "what wrong can you have resolved to do us both? Why this despair, when you are the master of my life, when nothing longer prevents our union before God and man? Can my son be an obstacle between us? Do you not feel large-hearted enough to bestow upon him part of your affection for me? Do you fear ever having to reproach yourself with the misery and desertion of the child of my bosom?"

"Your son!" cried Henri, sobbing. "I should have a more serious fear than that of not loving him. I should fear to love him too well, and that I could not resign myself to seeing his life borne on the current of the time in an opposite direction from mine. Custom and opinion would command me to leave him to the world, and I should desire to tear him from it, even should I render him unhappy, poor, and desolate, with me. [No, I could not look upon him with enough indifference and selfishness to consent that he should grow up like other men of his class]— no, no! that, and other things, everything, in your position and mine, is an insurmountable obstacle. From whichever side I contemplate such a future, I see nothing but a frenzied struggle,— misery for you, anathema upon me! It is impossible, Marcelle, eternally impossible. I love you too well to accept sacrifices whose extent you cannot measure, and whose results you cannot foresee. I see that you do not know me. You take me for a weak and vacillating visionary. I am an obstinate and incorrigible visionary. You have sometimes, perhaps, accused me of affectation; you believed that one word of yours would bring me back to what you think reason and truth. Oh, I am more unfortunate than you imagine, and I love you more than you can yet understand. In future — yes, in the time to come — you will thank me in your deepest thoughts for having chosen to be unhappy alone."

"In the future? And why? And when? What do you mean?"

"In the future, I mean, when you awake from this dark and evil dream into which I have drawn you, when you return to the world, and share its sweet and easy pleasures; when you are no longer an angel, in short, and descend again to earth."

"Yes, yes, when I am withered by selfishness, and corrupted by flattery! That is what you would say, that is your prophecy for me! Your stern pride does not believe me capable of receiving your thoughts, or of comprehending your heart. Say it out,— you do not think me worthy of you, Henri!"

"These are terrible words, madam, and this struggle cannot be longer endured. Let me fly, for we cannot understand one another now."

"You leave me thus!"

"No, I do not leave you. I go, far from your presence, to contemplate you in myself, and to adore you in my secret heart. I go to constant suffering, but with the hope that you will forget me, with remorse for having desired and sought your love, and with the one consolation, at least, of not having basely abused it."

Mme. de Blanchemont had risen to prevent Henri from going. She fell back, exhausted, upon her bench.

"Why, then, did you ask to see me?" inquired she, in a cold and offended tone, as he turned away.

"Yes, yes," said he, "you are right to blame me for it. It was my last piece of cowardice. I felt it, but I yielded to the necessity of seeing you once more. I hoped to find you changed toward me: your silence made me think you were; I was consumed by sorrow, and thought to obtain strength for my cure in your coldness. Why did I come! Why do you love me! Am I not the coarsest, most ungrateful, savage, and detestable of men? But it is well that you should see me so, and know that there is nothing to regret in me. That is best; and thus was it not well that I came?"

Henri spoke distractedly; his calm, grave features were distorted, and his voice, usually sweet and sympathetic, was painfully hard and untoned. Marcelle saw his suffering, but her own was so keen that she could say and do nothing for their mutual consolation. She sat pale and mute, her hands clenched together, and her body rigid as marble. Just on the point of leaving, Henri turned, and, seeing her thus, flung himself at her feet, covering them with tears and kisses. "Farewell," said he, "loveliest and purest of women, best of friends, noblest of lovers! Mayst thou find a heart worthy of thee, a man who shall love thee as I do, and who will bring thee a better marriage gift than discouragement and weariness of life! Mayst thou be happy, and bestow happiness, without encountering the struggles of an existence like mine! And finally, if there remain in the world where thou livest one spark of loyalty and of human charity, mayst thou rekindle it with thy divine breath, and find grace before God for thy caste and thy generation, whom thy perfection alone is sufficient to ransom!"

With these words, Henri rushed out, forgetting that he left Marcelle in despair. He seemed like one driven by the Furies.

Mme. de Blanchemont remained a long time as if stunned. When she returned to her apartments, she paced her chamber slowly till morning, without shedding one tear, or disturbing by one sigh the stillness of the night.

It would be rash to say that this young widow, only twenty-two, beautiful, wealthy, and distinguished in society for her grace, talents, and intelligence, was not in a certain degree mortified and affronted at seeing her hand refused by a man without birth, fortune, or reputation. Offended feminine pride probably sustained her at first. But the true nobility of her sentiments soon suggested more serious reflections, and for the first time she looked deeply into her own life, and into the general life of those about her. She recalled all that Lemor had said to her in former days, when the only connection possible between them was that of hopeless love. She was astonished that she had not been more seriously impressed by the austerity of his opinions, and had let them pass as romantic fancies. She began to estimate him with the calmness attained by a strong and generous determination, even amidst violent emotion. As the hours of the night passed on, and were echoed by the clear and silvery voices of the distant steeples through the silence of the great sleeping city, Marcelle arrived at that clearness of perception which sorrow draws from the meditations of long watchfulness. Educated with different views from Lemor, she had, nevertheless, been as it were predestined to share the love of this plebeian, and to find it her shelter from all the languor and weariness of aristocratic life. Hers was one of those strong and loving souls to whom self-sacrifice is a necessity, and who imagine no other happiness than that they give. Unhappy at home, weary of society, she had yielded with a girl's romantic confidence to a sentiment which had soon become sacred to her. Sincerely religious in her youth, it was inevitable that she should be passionately attached to a lover who respected her scruples and worshipped her purity. She was impelled by her very piety to heighten her love, and to desire to consecrate it by indissoluble bonds the moment she found herself free. She had thought with joy of bravely sacrificing those external advantages which are valued by the world, and the narrow prejudices of birth, by which her own judgment had never been misled. The poor child thought to do a great thing, and it was really great, for the world would have laughed or blamed. She had not foreseen that all this was yet as nought, and that the pride of the plebeian would repel her sacrifice almost as an affront.

Suddenly enlightened by the dismay, the grief, and the resistance of Lemor, Marcelle revolved in her perturbed mind all that she had dimly seen of the social crisis of the age. [The high regions of thought are no longer unfamiliar to the women of our time. All, according to the rate of their intelligence, can henceforth, without affectation on their own part, or ridicule on that of others, read daily, under all its forms, newspaper or romance, philosophy, politics, or poetry, official statement or intimate conversation, the great book of actual life, sad, diffuse, contradictory, yet always full of depth and significance.] Thus she well knew, as we all do, that this diseased and benumbed Present is at war with the Past, which holds it back, and the Future, which beckons it on. She saw sharp lightnings dart over her head, she felt the approach, sooner or later, of a great struggle. Her nature was not cowardly; she neither feared, nor closed her eyes. The regrets, complaints, terrors, and recriminations of her noble relations had wearied and disgusted her with fear. Youth will not belie the season of its bloom, and holds its sweet summer dear, though laden with storms! The affectionate and courageous Marcelle felt that, while with the being she loved, she could smile in the wildest tempest, and under the lowliest shelter. The threatening strife of external interests appeared to her as nothing. "Of what consequence are ruin, exile, and imprisonment?" thought she, when those who were deemed fortunate trembled around her. "They can never exile love; and as for me, thanks to Heaven, I love a poor man who will be unmolested."

But it had not occurred to her that she might be stricken in her very affections by this obscure and mysterious war, which exists in defiance of all official restraint and apparent discouragement. This conflict of feeling and opinion is now thoroughly opened, and Marcelle saw her illusions drop from her as suddenly as if she had awakened from a dream. War, moral and intellectual, is declared between the different classes imbued with opposite beliefs and passions, and Mme. de Blanchemont found, in the man who adored her, a sort of irreconcilable enemy. Shocked at first by the discovery, she familiarized herself gradually with the idea, which suggested to her new designs still more romantic and generous than those which had sustained her during the past month, and at the end of her long walk through her silent and deserted rooms, she found composure in a resolution which perhaps no one but herself could regard without a smile of admiration or of pity.

This took place quite recently — it may be last year.*

This novel was published in 1846. — *Tr.

CHAPTER II.

THE JOURNEY.

MARCELLE having married her cousin-german, bore the name of Blanchemont both before and after her marriage, and the estate and chateau of Blanchemont made part of her patrimony. The estate was valuable, but the chateau was no longer inhabited, even by the tenants to whom it had been abandoned for more than two hundred years, because it was much decayed, and would have cost too much in repairs. Mlle. de Blanchemont, early left an orphan, brought up in a Parisian convent, married very young, and, not initiated by her husband into the management of her affairs, had never seen this, her ancestral domain. Resolved to quit Paris, and to seek in the country a mode of life in accordance with her new projects, she chose Blanchemont as the commencement of her pilgrimage, with the intention of establishing herself in this residence, if it met her purpose. She was aware of the dilapidated state of her chateau, and this was one reason why she looked toward it in preference. The embarrassment and disorder in which her husband had left all her affairs and his own, served her as pretext for undertaking a journey, of which she spoke as only to last some weeks, but to which, in her secret thought, she assigned no precise object or term; her own real design being to quit Paris, and the manner of life to which she was there compelled.

Fortunately for her plans, there was no member of her family who could easily accompany her. She was an only child, and not troubled by the protection of elder brothers or sisters. Her husband's parents were aged, and as they were somewhat alarmed at the debt left by their son, which could be paid off only by excellent management, they were at once astonished and delighted to see a woman of twenty-two, who had hitherto shown no taste or aptitude for business, determine to arrange her own, and go to see for herself into the state of her property. Still they made several objections to her starting alone with her child. They wished that she should be attended by her man of business. They feared lest the child should suffer from a journey in such hot weather. Marcelle replied to her father and mother-in-law that a prolonged tête-à-tête with an old lawyer would not exactly alleviate the burden she was about to take upon herself; that she should obtain more direct information and advice better adapted to the locality, from the provincial advocates and notaries; in fine, that there was nothing so very difficult in settling accounts with tenants, and renewing leases. As to the child, the air of Paris enfeebled him more and more. The country, exercise, and sunshine would do him only good. And then Marcelle, grown suddenly adroit in overcoming the obstacles which she had foreseen and considered during her vigil related in the preceding chapter, laid stress upon her duty as guardian of her son. She was still in partial ignorance of the condition of M. de Blanchemont's estate, she said, and knew not whether he had drawn largely in advance upon his agents, or given heavy mortgages upon his lands, etc. All these things it was her duty to examine, and make a personal investigation, that she might know how to arrange her future establishment without compromising her boy's interests. She talked so wisely of these interests, of which in reality she thought very little, that at the end of twelve hours she had carried the day, and brought all the family to approve and praise her resolution. Her love for Henri had remained so secret, that no suspicion of it disturbed the confidence of the grandparents.

Sustained by unaccustomed activity and enthusiastic hope, Marcelle slept little better the night following that of her interview with Lemor. She had strange dreams, now cheerful, now sad. At last, awaking with the dawn, she cast a thoughtful look around her apartment, and was struck, for the first time, with the useless and extravagant luxury displayed about her, with the satin hangings, the extreme ease and softness of the furniture, the number of expensive trifles and costly toys; in short, the whole array of gilding, china, carved wood, and frippery which now crowds the house of a fine lady. "I should like to know," thought she, "why we have such contempt for women of the town. They make others give them what we are able to give ourselves. They sacrifice their modesty to the possession of things which should have no value in the eyes of thoughtful and serious women, and which we, nevertheless, regard as indispensable. They have tastes like ours, and it is to appear as rich and fortunate as we that they degrade themselves. We should give them the example of severe simplicity in our lives, before condemning them. And if our indissoluble marriages were compared with their transient unions, would there be found much more disinterestedness among the young girls of our class? Would there not be seen as often among us, as with them, a child bound to an old man, beauty profaned by the ugliness of vice, and intellect subjected to imbecility, all for love of a set of diamonds, a carriage, and an opera-box? Unhappy women! They say you also despise us, and well you may!"

Meanwhile, the pale, clear light which penetrated the curtains, showed all the enchantment of the sanctuary, which, in former times, Mme. de Blanchemont had pleased herself in decorating with exquisite taste. She had almost always lived apart from her husband, and this retired and beautiful chamber, into which Henri himself had never dared penetrate, was endeared to her only by sweet and pensive recollections. It was here that, flying from the world, she had read and meditated amid the perfume of flowers of unequalled beauty,—flowers such as are found only in Paris, and which now form part of the daily life of the wealthy. She had made this retreat as poetic as she could. She had adorned and beautified it for herself; she was attached to it as a mysterious refuge, where the sorrows of her life, and the passionate storms of her spirit, had always been soothed by meditation and prayer. She gazed around it long and affectionately, and then pronounced in her heart an eternal farewell to all these silent witnesses of her inner life,—a life concealed like that of the flower, whose stainless beauty could endure the broadest sunlight, but which bows its head beneath the foliage, for love of the shade and coolness. "My chosen retreat, my beloved ornaments, you have been dear to me," thought she; "but I can love you no longer, for you belong to wealth and indolence, and help to consecrate them. You typify to me, henceforth, all that divides me from Henri, and I could not look upon you without disgust and bitterness of heart. Let us part before we hate. Thou, stern Madonna, wouldst cease to protect me; clear and deep mirrors, you would make me detest my own image; and you, beautiful flower-vases, would have for me neither grace nor fragrance!"

Then, before writing, as she had resolved, to Henri, she went softly to see and bless the sleep of her child. The sight of the pale boy, whose precocious intellect had been developed at the expense of his bodily strength, passionately moved her. She spoke to him in her heart, as if, in his slumber, he could have heard and understood her maternal thought. "Be calm," she said to him, "I do not love *him* more than thee. Be not jealous. Were he not the best and noblest of men, I would not give him to thee for a father. Yes, little angel, thou art warmly and faithfully loved. Sleep on, we will never forsake thee!"

All bathed with delicious tears, Marcelle returned to her chamber, and wrote these few lines to Lemor:

"You are right, and I understand you. I am not worthy of you, but I shall become so, for I am resolved upon it. I am starting on a long journey. Do not be troubled about me, and continue to love me. In a year from to-day you shall receive a letter from me. Arrange your affairs so as to be free to come whenever I shall call you. If you do not find me sufficiently converted, you shall give me another year,—a year, two years, with hope, is almost happiness for two creatures who have loved hopelessly so long."

She sent this note very early. But M. Lemor was not to be found. He had gone away the evening before, no one knew where, or for how long. But it was certain that he would have the note, because one of his friends was charged to come every day to the modest lodging he had occupied, to receive and send to him any letters that might come.

Two days later, Mme. de Blanchemont, with her son, a maid, and a man-servant, were travelling by post through the wastes of La Sologne.

At eighty leagues from Paris the traveller found herself nearly in the centre of France, and stopped for the night in the town nearest in that direction to Blanchemont, which was still five or six leagues distant. In these central parts of the kingdom, notwithstanding all the new roads opened within a few years, there is so little communication between the different country places, that at a short distance it is difficult to obtain from the inhabitants any distinct information concerning a neighboring estate. All know very well the way to the town, or to the foreign district where their business occasionally calls them. But ask in a village the way to a farm a league beyond, and it is ten to one that nobody can tell you. There are so many ways! and they all look alike. Mme. de Blanchemont's servants were up early to prepare for their mistress's departure, but could obtain neither from the inn-keeper, his people, or the country travellers who happened to be there, and were still half asleep, any light upon the subject of Blanchemont. No one knew exactly where it was. One came from Montluçon, another knew Chateau Meillant; all had crossed Ardentes and La Châtre a hundred times, but of Blanchemont they knew only the name.

"It is a good estate," said one; "I know the farmer, but I never was there; it is a great way from us — four long leagues at least."

"Faith!" said another, "I saw the Blanchemont cattle at Berthenoux Fair only last year, and I spoke to M. Bricolin, the farmer, just as I speak to you now. Oh yes,

yes! I know Blanchemont, but I don't know which way it lies from here."

The bar-maid, like all bar-maids, knew nothing of the neighborhood. Like all bar-maids, she was new to the place.

The waiting-maid and man, accustomed to attend their mistress to superb residences known for twenty leagues round, and situated in civilized countries, began to think themselves in the depths of Sahara. Their faces elongated, and their pride was cruelly hurt at having to ask in vain the way to the chateau they were about to honor with their presence.

"Is it a hovel, or a den, then?" said Suzette, disdainfully, to Lapierre.

"It is the palace of Corybantes," replied Lapierre, who had admired in his youth a favorite melo-drama called the Castle of Corisanda, and who applied the name, somewhat distorted, to every ruin he met.

At last, a bright idea struck the stable-boy.

"I have a man up there in the hay-loft," said he, "who will tell you, for it is his business to drive through the country day and night. It is Grand-Louis, otherwise called the tall miller."

"Go fetch the tall miller," said Lapierre, majestically; "it appears that his sleeping-apartment is at the ladder's end."

The tall miller descended from his loft, stretching, and cracking the joints of his large arms and legs. Seeing his athletic form and resolute face, Lapierre came down from his facetious tone of grandeur, and politely questioned him. The miller was certainly well informed, but from the revelations which he made, Suzette judged it necessary to bring him to Mme. de Blanchemont, who was taking her chocolate in the dining-room with little Edward, and who, far from sharing the dismay of her people, was rejoiced to learn from them that Blanchemont was a lost and almost undiscoverable country.

The specimen of the soil who presented himself at this instant before her, was five feet eight inches in height, a remarkable stature in a country where the men are generally diminutive. He was robust in proportion, well-made, easy, and of a striking countenance. The girls of his neighborhood called him the handsome miller, and this epithet was as well deserved as the other. When he wiped away with the back of his sleeve the flour which usually covered his cheeks, he discovered a brown, animated, and beautifully toned complexion. His features were regular, strongly cut like his limbs, his eyes blue and deep-set, his teeth of dazzling whiteness, and his long chestnut hair, close-curled like that of a very strong man, framed squarely a broad and full forehead, which told rather of acuteness and good sense than of poetic ideality. He was dressed in a blouse of coarse blue, and gray linen pantaloons. He wore no stockings, great hob-nailed shoes, and carried a heavy stick of mountain-ash, terminated by a knot of the branch, so as to make a sort of club.

He entered with assurance which might have been taken for effrontery, if the mildness of his light blue eyes, and the smile of his large vermilion mouth, had not testified that frankness, goodness, and a sort of philosophic nonchalance, were at the foundation of his character.

"At your service, madam," said he, raising his wide-brimmed hat of gray felt, but without exactly removing it from his head; for, just as the old-fashioned peasant is obsequious, and disposed to salute every one better dressed than himself, so are those who date from after the Revolution remarkable for the adherence of their head-gear to their hair. "I am told that you wish to know of me the way to Blanchemont?"

The loud and sonorous voice of the tall miller startled Marcelle, who had not seen him enter. She turned quickly, surprised, at first, by his bluntness. But such is the privilege of beauty, that, on a mutual examination, the young miller and the young lady presently forgot the sort of mistrust always inspired at first by a difference in rank. Only Marcelle, seeing him disposed to be familiar, thought proper to remind him, by exceeding politeness, of the regard due to her sex.

"I am much obliged to you for your kindness," said she, bowing to him, "and I pray you, sir, to be good enough to tell me if there is a tolerable carriage-road from here to the farm of Blanchemont."

The tall miller, without being invited, had already taken a chair to seat himself, but on hearing himself called *Sir*, his fine natural perception told him that he was speaking with a person of native sweetness and dignity. Without any embarrassment, he quietly took off his hat, and resting his hands on the back of the chair, as if to assure himself—

"There is a cross-road, not very smooth," said he, "but you will not overturn if you take care; you need only to follow it, and not take another. I will explain that to your postilion. But the surest way will be to take a *patache* here, for the Black Valley is worse than usual, on account of the late rain-storms, and I do not believe that your little carriage-wheels would ever come out of the ruts. It might be, but I would not answer for it."

"I see that your ruts are no joke, and that it will be most prudent to take your advice. You are sure that I shall not overturn in a patache?"

"Oh! do not be afraid, madam."

"I am not afraid for myself, but for this little child. That is what makes me prudent."

"Indeed then it would be a pity to break these little bones," said the tall miller, going up to Edward with a look of cordial kindness. "What a cunning, pretty little man it is!"

"Very slender, is he not?" said Marcelle, smiling.

"Faith! not strong, but pretty as a girl. And so you are coming down to our country, sir?"

"Ho! how tall he is!" cried Edward, catching hold of Grand-Louis, who had bent towards him. "Make me touch the ceiling!"

The miller took the child, and, lifting him above his head, carried him along the blackened cornice of the room.

"Take care!" said Mme. de Blanchemont, somewhat alarmed by the freedom with which the rustic Hercules handled her child.

"Oh! don't fear," answered Grand-Louis. "I had rather break all the *alochons* of my mill, than one of this gentleman's fingers."

The word *alochon* delighted the boy, who repeated it laughing, but without understanding its meaning.

"You do not know what that is?" said the miller. "They are the little wings — the bits of wood — which ride on the wheel, and which the water pushes to make it turn. I will show you how, if you ever come where I live."

"Yes, yes — alochon!" cried the child, bursting into a laugh, and turning a somerset in the miller's arms.

"Is the little rogue making fun of me?" said Grand-Louis, replacing him in his chair. "Well, madam, I must go to my business. Have I done all I can for you?"

"Yes, my friend," replied Marcelle, forgetting her reserve in her kind feeling.

"Oh, I ask no better than to be your friend," gayly returned the miller, with a look which expressed that, from a person less young and beautiful, this familiarity would not have gratified him.

"Very well," thought Marcelle, with a blush and a smile; "I shall take the warning. Farewell, sir," she added aloud, "till we meet again, for you doubtless live at Blanchemont?"

"Very near. I am the Miller of Angibault, one league from your chateau; for I understand that you are the lady of Blanchemont?"

Marcelle had forbidden her people to betray her incognito. She desired to come unobserved to the country; but she saw plainly, by the manner of the miller, that her rank as proprietor did not make as much sensation as she had feared. An absentee proprietor is a stranger for whom nobody cares. The farmer who represents him, and transacts his affairs, is quite another personage.

Notwithstanding her intention to start early, and arrive at Blanchemont before the noonday heats, Marcelle was forced to pass most of the day at this inn. Every patache of the town was in the country, on account of a great fair in the neighborhood, and it was necessary to await the return of the first. It was not till near three in the afternoon that Suzette came to inform her mistress, in a lamentable voice, that a sort of willow basket, horrible and shameful, was the only vehicle yet at her disposal.

To the great astonishment of the wondering maid, Mme. de Blanchemont did not hesitate to make use of it. Taking a few necessary articles, she gave the keys of her carriage and trunks to the innkeeper, and set off in the classic *patache* — which respectable testimony to the simplicity of our fathers is daily becoming more rare, even on the roads of the Black Valley. That which Marcelle was unlucky enough to find was of the purest indigenous construction, and an antiquary would have contemplated it with respect. It was long and low, like a coffin; no manner of springs varied its motions; the wheels, as high as the top, were prepared to brave the muddy trenches which furrow our cross-roads, and which the miller, doubtless through national vanity, was pleased to denominate ruts; finally, the top itself was woven only of osier, and comfortably lined with coarse cloth and dried mud, of which latter every good jolt detached fragments upon the travellers' heads. A little, lean, and fiery stallion rattled along with this rustic car; and the *patachon*, or driver, sitting sideways on the shaft, his legs hanging — inasmuch as our fathers found it more convenient to bring a chair to help them climb into their carriages than to twist their feet on a step — was the least crowded and least endangered of the passengers.

The journey was, nevertheless, endurable while it was possible to keep to the high road. The patachon was a lad of fifteen, red-headed, flat-nosed, forward, sticking at nothing — not hesitating to urge on his horse with all the oaths of his rich vocabulary, without respect to the presence of ladies — and pleasing himself with exhausting the ardor of the courageous pony, who never in his life had tasted oats, and who was put into capital spirits by the mere sight of the green fields; but when these were succeeded by a barren wilderness, he lowered his head — more in anger than in sorrow — and dragged the carriage furiously over rough and smooth, in a manner absolutely cruel to the occupants.

CHAPTER III.

THE MENDICANT.

IT was far worse when they left the sands to descend into the heavy clay soil of the Black Valley. From the edge of the sterile upland, Mme. de Blanchemont had admired the vast and beautiful landscape, which was unrolled from her feet to the horizon in many-wooded zones of pale violet color, cut by golden bands from the rays of the setting sun. There are no more charming situations in France. Yet the vegetation is not in itself remarkably vigorous. No great river furrows these plains, and no slated roofs reflect the sun. There are no picturesque mountains, nothing is striking, nothing extraordinary in this quiet scenery, but, from the heights of Labreuil or Corlay, a single glance takes in a noble succession of cultivated estates, and an endless parcelling out of fields, meadows, coppice, and broad commons, which give variety of form and color, blended in one general harmony of dark verdure shading into blue. It is a rich confusion of ample enclosures, orchard-hidden cabins, curtaining poplars, and low-lying bushy pastures; while, upon the table-lands, paler fields and brighter hedges relieve the neighboring masses, and the whole country, for fifty leagues round, presents a character of peculiar and harmonious grace.

But this magnificent panorama was soon lost from the sight of our traveller. Once involved in the windings of the Black Valley, the scene changes. By turns descending and ascending roads bordered by high thickets, you skirt no precipices, but these roads are themselves precipices. The sun, sinking behind the trees, gives them a peculiar appearance, singularly wild and graceful.

There are mysterious caves beneath their dark shadows, watercourses of emerald green leading to stagnant pools or pathless morasses, steep descents impossible for a carriage to reascend, and, in fine, continual enchantment for the imagination, and real danger for those who venturously assay otherwise than on foot, or at least on horseback, these enticing, uncertain, and treacherous by-ways.

While the sun was above the horizon, the red-haired charioteer made out very well. He followed the track most travelled, and consequently most rough, but also the safest. He crossed two or three brooks by observing the marks of cart-wheels on their banks. But when the sun had set, the darkness came on rapidly in these hollow ways, and the last peasant whom they addressed answered carelessly:

"Go on! go on! you have only a short league more, and the road is all good."

Now this was the sixth peasant who, within about two hours, had stated that there was only a short league more, and this good road was such that the horse was exhausted, and the travellers at the end of their patience. Marcelle herself began to fear an overturn; for if the patachon and his nag needed all their skill to choose their passage in broad day, it was impossible that in dark night they should avoid the false openings which the unequal nature of the ground renders as dangerous as picturesque, and which are liable to sudden terminations, exposing you to a fall of ten or twelve perpendicular feet. The lad had never penetrated so far into the Black Valley; he lost patience, and swore furiously every time that he was forced to retrace his steps to recover the way; he complained of thirst, of hunger, groaned over the fatigue of his horse, beating him unmercifully meanwhile, and cursed the savage country and its stupid inhabitants, with all the airs of a little cockney.

More than once, seeing the road steep, but dry, Marcelle and her servants alighted; but they could not walk five minutes without coming to a hollow where the road narrowed, and was entirely occupied by stagnant springs on the level of the ground, forming a liquid mud impossible for a delicate woman to pass on foot. The Parisian Suzette had rather be overturned, she said, than leave her shoes in these sloughs; and Lapierre, who had passed his life in pumps upon polished floors, was so awkward and confused, that Mme. de Blanchemont dared not let him carry her son.

The usual answer of the peasant, when asked the way, is, "Go straight on, always straight on." This is simply a joke — a sort of pun — which means that you are to walk straight on your legs; for there is not a straight road in the Black Valley. The numerous ravines made by the Indre, the Vauvre, the Couarde, the Gourdon, and a hundred lesser streams which take different names in their course, and have never borne the yoke of any bridge or dike, force you to a thousand turns to find a fordable place, so that you are often obliged to turn your back upon the spot you wish to reach.

When they came to an angle of the road surmounted by a cross — a sinister locality always peopled by the peasant imagination with demons, sorcerers, and fantastic animals — our embarrassed travellers addressed themselves to a beggar, who, seated upon the death-stone,* cried to them in a monotonous voice, "Charitable souls, have pity on a miserable creature!"

The great stature of this man, who was very old, but still robust, and armed with an enormous stick, was not very encouraging in case of a single combat. His stern features could not be well distinguished, but there was something more imperious than suppliant in the inflection of his harsh voice. His melancholy attitude and his filthy rags contrasted with the sense of humor which had made him put an old bouquet and a faded ribbon on his hat.

"Friend," said Marcelle, giving him a piece of money, "show us the way to Blanchemont, if you know it."

Instead of replying, the beggar gravely continued to repeat aloud an Ave Maria in Latin, which he had begun for his own benefit.

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* A hollow stone, in which each passing funeral leaves, at the foot of the cross, a small cross rudely cut in wood.

"Answer," said Lapierre to him; "you can mumble your Pater Nosters afterwards."

The beggar turned his head scornfully toward the footman, and continued his prayers.

"Don't speak to that man," said the patachon; "he is an old beggar tramp, and never knows where he is going. You meet him everywhere, and nowhere in his senses."

"The road to Blanchemont?" said the mendicant, when he had at last finished his prayer; "you are not on it, my children; you must turn, and take the first to the right."

"Are you sure of it?" said Marcelle.

"I have been there more than six hundred times. If you do not believe me, do as you will; it is all the same to me."

"He seems to know what he is about," said Marcelle to her driver. "Let us attend to him; what reason should he have to deceive us?"

"Bah! the pleasure of doing harm," replied the anxious patachon. "I don't trust this man."

Marcelle insisted upon following the advice of the beggar, and soon the patache plunged into a narrow gully, winding, and prodigiously steep. "I say," resumed the swearing patachon, while his horse stumbled at every step, "that this old cheat sent us wrong."

"Go on," said Marcelle, "since there is no way to go back."

The farther they advanced, the more impassable became the road, but it was too narrow to turn the vehicle; two splendid hedges confined it closely. After performing miracles of strength and endurance, the little nag arrived at the bottom, under a clump of old oaks which appeared to be on the border of a wood. The road suddenly widened opposite a great pool of standing water, not in the least resembling the ford of a river. The patachon, nevertheless, plunged in, but when half across he sunk so deep that he would fain have turned. It was the last effort of his meagre Bucephalus. The wheels sank to the hub, and the animal fell, breaking the shafts. It was necessary to unharness him. Lapierre stepped into the water up to his knees, groaning like a man at point of death; but when he had helped the patachon to free the horse, all their efforts were useless (neither of them was strong) to raise the carriage. Then the patachon sprung nimbly on his beast, and cursing the beggar for a wizard, and swearing by all the devils below, he went off at full trot, promising to go for help, but in a tone which foretold that it would be no weight on his conscience to leave his passengers in the swamp till morning.

The patache had not been overturned. Carelessly tipped sideways in the marsh, it was still very habitable, and Marcelle arranged herself upon the back seat with her child lying in her lap, that he might sleep comfortably, for Edward had long since asked for his supper and bed, and, having appeased his hunger on some cakes from Suzette's pocket, he needed no entreaty to begin his nap. Mme. de Blanchemont, judging that her small driver would not hurry himself to return if he found a good resting-place, desired Lapierre to go and see if he could not discover some cabin near by. They are so deep buried under foliage, and so silent and tightly closed after sunset, that one must touch them to see them, and take them by assault to find hospitality at that unaccustomed hour. Old Lapierre had but one anxiety — to find a fire to dry his feet and keep off the rheumatism — and needed no urging to leave the morass, after having assured himself that the patache, leaning against the prostrate trunk of an old willow, was in no danger of sinking deeper.

The most forlorn of the party was Suzette, who was horribly afraid of robbers, wolves, and snakes; three pests unknown in the Black Valley, but which are never out of the mind of a lady's maid on a journey. Meanwhile the easy composure of her mistress prevented her from yielding aloud to her terror; and nestling, as best she could, upon the front seat, she betook herself to silent weeping.

"What is the matter, Suzette?" asked Marcelle, when she perceived it.

"Ah! madam," replied she, sobbing, "do not you hear the frogs sing? They will come upon us, and fill the carriage —"

"And eat us up, doubtless," returned Mme. de Blanchemont, laughing outright.

In reality, the green dwellers in the morass, disturbed for an instant by the fall of the horse and the clamor of the driver, had resumed their monotonous psalmody. Dogs were also heard to bay and howl, but from such a distance that they gave no reason to count upon prompt assistance. The moon had not yet risen, but the stars shone on the stagnant water of the marsh, which had again become smooth. A soft breeze crept through the tall reeds that grew in thick tufts on the bank.

"Come, Suzette," said Marcelle, who had already yielded herself to a poetic revery, "one is not so badly off as I thought in a swamp, and, if you choose, you will sleep as if you were in your bed."

"My lady must have lost her senses," thought Suzette, "to think herself well off in such a situation. O heaven, madam!" she cried, after a moment's silence, "it seems to me I hear a wolf howl! Are we not in the midst of a forest?"

"The forest is only a willow swamp, I believe," replied Marcelle, "and as for the wolf you hear howl, it is a man singing. If he would come our way he might help us to reach firm land."

"And if it is a robber?"

"In that case it is a kindly robber, who sings to warn us to take care. Listen, Suzette! without jesting, he is coming here; the voice is nearer."

In reality, a voice, full, manly, and harmonious, although rough and untaught, came over the silent fields, with the measured accompaniment of the slow and regular step of a horse; but this voice was still far off, and there was no certainty that the singer was taking the direction of the swamp, which might be entirely impassable. When the song was ended, whether it were that the horse trod on the turf, or that the rider had turned another way, nothing more was heard.

At this moment Suzette, whose terrors were renewed, saw a silent figure glide along the pool. Reflected in the water, it appeared gigantic. She gave a cry, and the figure, plunging into the marsh, came straight toward the patache, though slowly, and with precaution.

"Do not be afraid, Suzette," said Mme. de Blanchemont, herself now a little uneasy. "It is the old beggar we saw this afternoon. Perhaps he will show us a house from which we can obtain help. Friend," said she, with much presence of mind, "my servant, over there, will go with you if you will show him the way to some house."

"Thy servant, little one?" answered the mendicant, familiarly. "He is not there; he is far off. And besides, he is so old, so weak, and stupid, that he could not help thee here."

For once, Marcelle was frightened.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MORASS.

THIS answer sounded like the rude threat of an ill-intentioned person. Marcelle seized Edward in her arms, resolute to defend him at the price of her life, if necessary, and she was about to leap into the water on the opposite side from that by which the beggar was approaching, when the rustic chant before heard was resumed in a second couplet, and this time at very little distance. The beggar stopped.

"We are lost!" murmured Suzette. "There is the rest of the band coming."

"We are saved, on the contrary," answered Marcelle. "That is an honest peasant's voice."

In truth, the voice was full of cheerful assurance, and the calm, clear song evidently came from a good conscience. The horse's step also came nearer. The countryman was evidently descending the path leading to the morass.

The mendicant drew back to the edge, and remained motionless, seeming to show more prudence than fear.

Marcelle leaned out of the patache to call the rider; but he sang too loudly to hear her, and if his horse, frightened at the sight of the black mass that the patache presented, had not stopped with a snort, his master might have passed on without paying any attention to it.

"What the devil is there?" cried, at last, a stentorian voice, without a tone of fear, and which Mme. de Blanchemont recognized immediately for that of the tall miller. "Halloo there, friends! your carriage does not exactly move. Are you all dead inside, that you say nothing?"

When Suzette recognized the miller, whose handsome physiognomy had already made an agreeable impression on her that morning, she became very gracious, notwithstanding her slight toilette. She related the piteous condition to which her mistress and herself were reduced, and Grand-Louis, after laughing immoderately at their misadventure, declared that nothing was easier than to deliver them. He began first to free himself from a large sack of grain, which he carried before him on his horse; and perceiving the mendicant, who seemed not to think of concealment —

"Ah! you are here too, Father Cadoche?" said he, in a friendly tone. "Stand aside, so that I can fling down my sack!"

"I was here trying to help these poor children!" replied the mendicant; "but there is so much water that I could not go forward."

"Stay quiet, my old man, and do not wet yourself for nothing. At your age it is dangerous. I can easily get out these women without you." And he went towards Mme. de Blanchemont, sinking up to his horse's breast in the mud. "Come, madam," said he gayly, "step out a little on the shaft, and seat yourself behind me; nothing is easier. You will not even wet the tip of your foot, for your legs are not as long as those of your humble servant. Your patachon must have been a fool to have mired you here, when two steps to the left there are not six inches of mud!"

"I am distressed to cause you such a wetting," said Marcelle; "but my child — "

"Ah! the little gentleman? Just so! him first. Give him to me — that is it — here he is in front of me. Be easy, the saddle will not hurt him; neither my horse nor I are used to one. Come, sit behind me, my little lady, and don't be afraid. Sophie has a strong back and sure legs."

The miller gently placed the mother and child upon the turf.

"And me!" cried Suzette; "are you going to leave me in here?"

"By no means, mademoiselle," said Grand-Louis, returning for her. "Give me your bundles, too, we will get all out — make yourself easy. And now," said he, when he had effected the entire debarkation, "this unlucky patachon may come when he will for his carcase of a carriage. I have neither shafts nor ropes to harness Sophie to it, but I will take you wherever you please, my little ladies."

"Are we very far from Blanchemont?" asked Marcelle.

"The deuce! yes! a pretty way your patachon took to get you there! It is two leagues off; and when you arrive everybody will be in bed, and it will be no easy thing to make them let us in. But if you will, we are only a short league from my mill at Angibault. It is not splendid, but clean, and my mother is a good soul, who will make no fuss about getting up, putting white sheets on the beds, and twisting a couple of chickens' necks. Will that suit you? No compliments! Come, ladies! the fate of war, and the fate of the mill! The patache will take no cold by passing the night out of doors, and to-morrow morning it shall be got out and cleaned, and you shall go to Blanchemont at what hour you please."

There was cordiality, and even a kind of delicacy, in the miller's blunt invitation, and Marcelle, won by his good-heartedness, and the mention he made of his mother, accepted it with gratitude.

"That is well, you will do me a pleasure," said the miller; "I do not know you — you may be the lady of Blanchemont — but that is all one to me; were you the devil (and they say the devil can look young and pretty when he will), I should be happy to keep you from passing a bad night. Ah! so; I cannot leave my sack of corn; I will put it on Sophie, the little one shall sit on it, the mamma behind; it will not trouble you,— on the contrary, it will be convenient to lean on. The young lady will walk with me, and talk with Father Cadoche, who is not very well dressed, but has plenty of wit. But where has the old lizard gone?" said he, looking around for the vanished mendicant. "Halloo there, Father Cadoche! are you coming to sleep at our house? He does not answer,— never mind, that is not his fancy for to-night. Let us start, ladies!"

"You know this man, then?" said Marcelle. "He frightened us very much."

"I have known him ever since I was born. He is not a bad man. You were wrong to fear him."

"He seemed to me, however, to threaten us, and he did not appear to use the thee and thou in a friendly manner."

"He said thee and thou? The old rogue! He is not bashful, he! But that is his way; do not mind it; he is a good-hearted man, an original; in short, he is Father Cadoche, called uncle by everybody, and who promises his inheritance to every passer-by, though he is as poor as his own stick."

Marcelle travelled very comfortably upon the strong and gentle Sophie. Little Edward, whom she held close before her, was delighted with his ride. With his little feet he rapped the shoulders of the animal, who never felt it, and went none the quicker, but plodded on like a true miller's horse, needing no guidance, knowing her way by heart, and finding her path through the darkness, amid water and stones, without a mistake or a stumble. At the desire of Marcelle, who feared to have her old servant pass the night in the open air, the miller several times uplifted his thundering voice, and Lapierre, who had lost himself in a neighboring wood, and had been for more than half an hour describing circles within the space of an acre, soon rejoined the little caravan.

After an hour's march, the sound of water over a dam was heard, and the pale light of the moon showed the vine-covered roof of the mill, and the silvered banks of the river, close grown with mint and thyme.

Marcelle sprung lightly upon this fragrant carpet, after the miller had taken down her boy, who, joyful and proud of his equestrian journey, threw his arms around his new friend's neck, saying, "Good-day, *alochon!*"

As Grand-Louis had predicted, his old mother rose good-naturedly, and, with the help of a little servant-girl of fourteen or fifteen, the beds were soon ready. Mme. de Blanchemont had more need of rest than food; she prevented the old woman from bringing her anything but a cup of milk, and, exhausted with fatigue, she slept with her child by her maternal side, in a feather bed of immoderate height, and exquisite softness. These beds, whose only fault is to be too warm and soft, compose, with a full straw mattress, all the sleeping arrangement of the inhabitants, rich or poor, of a country where geese abound, and where the winters are very cold.

Weary with a very rapid journey of eighty leagues, and especially with that part made in the patache, which had been, so to speak, the crown of it, the fair Parisian would gladly have slept late the next morning; but it was scarcely dawn when the crowing of cocks, the *tic-tac* of the mill, the loud voice of the miller, and all the sounds of rustic labor, compelled her to relinquish a longer repose. Besides, Edward, who was not in the least tired, and was already stimulated by the country air, began to frisk upon his bed. Notwithstanding all the noise without, Suzette, in the same room, slept so soundly that Marcelle had not the heart to wake her. Beginning then the new kind of life she had determined to embrace, she rose and dressed herself without the help of her maid, completed with extreme pleasure the toilet of her boy, and went out to bid good-morrow to her hosts. She found only the mill-boy and the little maid, who told her that the master and mistress had just gone to the end of the field to make ready the breakfast. Curious to know in what these preparations consisted, Marcelle crossed the rustic bridge, which also served as gate to the mill-pond, and leaving on her right a fine plantation of young poplars, she traversed the meadow, following the course of the river, or rather brook, which, though always full to the brim, and laving the flowering grass, is here no more than ten feet wide. This slender watercourse has, nevertheless, a strong current, and near the mill forms quite a large basin, motionless, deep, and smooth as glass, in which are reflected the ancient willows, and mossy roofs of the dwelling. Marcelle contemplated this peaceful and lovely scene, which answered, she knew not why, to her own heart. She had seen more beautiful spots, but there are places which insensibly affect us with unconquerable emotion, and where we feel as if led by fate to meet joy, grief, or duty.

CHAPTER V.

THE MILL.

WHEN Marcelle made her way into the deep wood where she expected to find her hosts, she felt as if she were entering a virgin forest. The ravages of the little river, when swollen by the rainy season, had everywhere undermined and broken the ground, which was covered with a heavy growth of trees, alders, beeches, and magnificent aspens, half overthrown, and with their enormous roots lying on the wet sand, like interlaced serpents and hydras, leant over each other in superb confusion. The numerous channels of the stream flowed capriciously around many verdant islands, where, upon the dewy grass, vigorous festoons of briar were entwined with a hundred varieties of tall plants; and all were left to the incomparable grace of their free growth. No landscape-garden could equal this natural luxuriance, the happily grouped masses of foliage, the numerous basins which the river had hollowed for itself in the sand and among the flowers, the bowers meeting above the water, the varied grace of the banks, and the fallen branches overgrown with moss, which looked as if thrown there to complete the beauty of the whole. Marcelle was lost in a kind of rapture, and would have forgotten herself and the passing time, but for her little Edward, who ran before her like a freed fawn, eager to make the print of his tiny feet on the smooth sand by the water. But the fear that he might fall in aroused her; and, following his steps, and burying herself deeper and deeper in the enchanted wilderness, she felt as if in one of those dreams where nature appears to us in such absolute beauty, that we are sometimes ready to say we have seen the earthly paradise.

At length the miller and his mother appeared on the opposite bank — one fishing for trout, the other milking her cow.

"Ah! ah! my little lady, already up?" said the miller. "You see we are busy for you. Here is my old mother tormenting herself because she has nothing good to offer you; but as for me, I say that you will be contented with our good heart. We are neither cooks nor tavern-keepers; but when there is good appetite on one side, and good will on the other — "

"You treat me a hundred times too well, you kind people," answered Marcelle, venturing, with Edward in her arms, upon the plank which served as bridge to where they stood. "I have never passed so good a night, nor seen so lovely a morning, as here. What fine trout you are taking, Mr. Miller! And you, mother, what beautiful, white, foaming milk! You spoil me, and I know not how to thank you."

"We are thanked enough if you are pleased," said the old woman, with a smile. "We never see such fine people as you, and we do not know much about compliments, but we see plainly that you are kind, and not exacting. Come, come to the house! the cakes will soon be done, and the little one surely likes strawberries. There is a place in the garden where he will like to pick them himself."

"You are so good, and your country is so beautiful, that I should like to pass my life here," said Marcelle, impulsively.

"So?" said the miller, smiling good-naturedly. "Well! if the heart tells you — you see, mother, that our country is not so ugly as you think. Did not I tell you that a rich person might find it agreeable?"

"Yes," said the old woman, "if a chateau were built here, and then it would be a chateau very ill-placed."

"Is it possible that you are discontented here?" said Marcelle, in astonishment.

"Oh! I am not at all discontented," replied the miller's mother. "I have passed my life here, and I shall die here, if it please God. I have had time to get used to it, in seventy-five years that I have *reigned* here; and besides, one needs must content one's self with one's own country. But if you were to pass a winter here, madam, you would not call it beautiful,— when all our fields are under water, and we cannot even step into our yard; no, no, it is not pleasant!"

"Bah! bah! women are always frightened," said Grand-Louis. "You know that the water will not carry away the house, and that the mill is well insured. And then, one must take the bad weather as it comes. All winter you want summer, mother, and all summer you do nothing but fret about the coming winter. I tell you that one might live here without care or trouble."

"And why dost thou not do so?" returned the mother. "Art thou without care thyself? Dost thou like to be a miller, and to have thy house so often under water? Ah! if I were to tell all thou sayst sometimes upon the misfortune of having a poor house, and not making money!"

"There is no use in repeating all the nonsense that I talk sometimes, mother, you need not take the trouble." But, while speaking thus reproachfully, the tall miller looked at his mother with affectionate, and almost supplicating gentleness. Their conversation did not appear sc commonplace to Mme. de Blanchemont, as it may have done to the reader. In her present state of mind, she was desirous to know how those who were obliged to lead a rustic life—always the easiest for the poor—felt and appreciated it. She was not examining and testing it by merely romantic notions. Henri's doubt of her ability to embrace it, had made her feel its real privations and trials. But she believed her courage equal to these trials, and what she hoped to learn from the opinion of her hosts of the mill, was the degree in which the philosophy or insensibility, given them by nature, would compare with that which she could gather from poetic feeling, and the yet more religious and powerful sentiment of love. Thus she manifested some curiosity when Grand-Louis had gone to fry his trout, as he said, in the stove.

"So then," she said to the old woman, "you are not happy; and even your son, notwithstanding his cheerful manner, worries sometimes?"

"Eh, madam! as for me," replied the good woman, "I should be rich enough, and contented enough, if I saw my son happy. My poor husband was well enough off; his business was good; but he died before he could bring up his family, and I have had to do the best I could for all my children. Now each one's share is small; the mill came to my Louis, who is called Grand-Louis, as they called his father Grand-Jean, and as they call me Grand'-Marie. For, God helping, our family makes a fine growth, and all my children were of good size. But that is the most we have; the rest is so little, that it is not enough to raise false hopes."

"But, after all, why would you have more? Do you suffer from poverty? It seems to me you are well lodged; your bread is good, your health excellent."

"Yes, yes, thanks to the good God, we have what is needful, and many people better than we have not so much; but you see, madam, happiness or unhappiness it is according to one's ideas—"

"There you have the real question," said Marcelle, who observed good sense and natural discrimination in both the physiognomy and words of her companion; "but since you appreciate it so well, how comes it that you complain?"

"It is not I who complain, it is my Louis! or rather, it is I who fret, because I see him unhappy; and it is he who does not fret, because he is brave, and afraid of troubling me. But sometimes, too, when the poor boy is too sad, he will say just one word that goes to my heart. He will say, '*Never*, *never*, mother!' and that means that he has given up all hope. And then, afterwards, as he is naturally lively, like his poor dear father, he will seem to make himself easy, and tell me all sorts of stories, either to comfort me, or because he fancies that what he takes into his head will really happen in time."

"But what has he taken into his head? Is he ambitious?"

"Oh yes, he has a great ambition,—a real madness!

but it is not the love of money; for he is no miser, not he! In the division of the property he gave his brothers and sisters all they wanted, and when he earns a little, he is ready to give it to the first who needs; and it is not vanity, for he always wears his peasant clothes, though he has had an education, and might go as well dressed as a *bourgeois;* and it is not bad company, nor extravagance, for he is contented with everything, and never wants to go anywhere but on business."

"Well, then, what is it?" said Marcelle, whose sweet face and cordial tone insensibly drew out the old woman's confidence.

"Ah, and what should it be but love?" said the miller's mother, with a mysterious smile, and an indescribable and delicate air of insight, which, in matters of sentiment, establishes an electric chain of freedom and interest between women of every age and rank.

"You are right," said Marcelle, drawing nearer to Grand'-Marie; "love is the great disturber of youth. And is the woman he loves richer than he?"

"Oh! it is not a woman! my poor Louis is too honorable to think of a married woman! It is a girl, a young girl, a pretty girl, by my faith, and a good girl, I must allow. But she is rich—rich; and, think of it as much as we may, her parents will never give her to a miller."

Marcelle was struck by the similarity between the miller's romance and that of her own life, and felt curious and interested.

"If this good and pretty girl loves your son," said she, "she will marry him in the end."

"So I tell myself sometimes, for she does love him, madam, as I am sure, though my Louis is not. She is a prudent girl, and would not tell a man she would marry him against her parents' will; and then she is very gay, and a little coquettish; that is natural at her age—she is only eighteen! Her little mocking ways make my poor boy desperate; so to comfort him, when I see that he does not eat, and talks loud to Sophie (our mare, saving your presence), I cannot help telling him what I think; and he believes me a little, for he sees that I know more than he about women's hearts. Now I see plainly that she blushes when she meets him, and when she passes our house, she looks round for him; yet it is not right to tell my boy so, for it keeps up his madness, and I had much better tell him that he must not think of it."

"Why so?" asked Marcelle. "Love is all-powerful. Be sure, good mother, that a loving woman is stronger than all obstacles."

"Yes, so I thought when I was young. I said to myself that woman's love was like the river, breaking all away where it comes, and laughing at bars and dikes. I myself was richer than my poor Grand-Jean, yet I married him. But there was not the same difference as between us now and Mademoiselle—"

She was interrupted by little Edward calling to his mother.

"See! Henri is here!"

CHAPTER VI.

A NAME ON A TREE.

MME. DE BLANCHEMONT started, and hardly repressed a scream, as she looked around for the cause of her child's exclamation. Following the direction of his looks and gestures, she saw a name cut with a knife on the bark of a tree. The boy had just begun to read, and knew certain words; familiar names, perhaps taught to him by preference. He had recognized that of Henri inscribed upon the smooth stem of a white poplar, and he fancied that his friend had just traced it. Carried away by her child's imagination, Marcelle really expected for some moments to see Henri Lemor appear from among the alders and aspens. Short reflection was needed to make her smile sadly at her easy credulity, and yet, as even a vain hope is hard to relinquish, she could not help asking Grand'-Marie which of her family or neighbors was named Henri.

"None that I know," answered she. "To be sure there is a family called Henri in the town of Nohant, but they are people like me, and don't know how to write on paper or trees — unless the son should have come back from the army — but goodness! it is more than two years since he was here."

"Then you do not know who can have written this name?"

"I did not even know there was anything written there. I never paid any attention to it. And if I had seen it, I don't know how to read. I might have been well taught, but it was not the fashion in my time. They made a cross upon deeds instead of a signature, and it was just as good in law."

The miller now came back to say that breakfast was ready. He could read and write, and seeing Marcelle's attention fixed upon this name, which he had not before observed, he tried to explain.

"I see nobody but the man we had here the other day who could have amused himself in this way," said he, "for there are no city people come here."

"And what man was here the other day?" said Marcelle, trying to seem indifferent.

"The gentleman did not tell us his name," replied the old woman. "We do not know much, and yet we know it is not polite to be inquisitive. Louis is like me in that, and though our country people ask all sorts of questions of every stranger they meet, we never desire to know more than others desire to tell us. The gentleman seemed to wish to keep his name and intentions to himself."

"He asked plenty of questions, however, that chap," observed Grand-Louis, "and we might fairly have questioned him in our turn. I don't know why I did not dare There was nothing repulsive about him, and I am not particularly bashful; but he had an odd look, quite sad to see."

"What kind of look?" asked Marcelle, whose curiosity and interest increased at each word.

"I can hardly tell you," replied he; "I did not observe it much while he was here, but when he was gone, I began to think of it. Do you remember, mother?"

"Yes, thou saidst to me, 'See, mother, here is one like me, who has not all he wants.'"

"Bah! bah! I did not say that," returned Grand-Louis, fearing for his secret, and not suspecting that his mother had already revealed it. "I only said, 'Here is one who does not appear glad to live.'"

Marcelle was touched. "Was he so very sad?" she asked.

"He seemed to think a great deal. He staid here alone at least three hours, sitting on the ground just where you are now, and gazing at the river, as if he would count each drop that passed. I thought he was sick, and I came twice to ask him to come into the house and refresh himself. When I came near, he sprang up like a man just waked, and looked vexed. Then all at once his face was very sweet and gentle, and he thanked me, but he would take nothing but a bit of bread and a glass of water."

"It is Henri!" cried Edward, who, clinging to his mother's gown, had attentively listened. "Thou knowest, mamma, that Henri never drinks wine!"

Mme. de Blanchemont blushed, turned pale, blushed again, and in a voice which she vainly tried to steady, asked what this stranger had been doing in the country.

"I know nothing about it," replied the miller, who thought to himself, as he fixed his penetrating look upon the beautiful and changing countenance of the young baroness, "here is still another with a busy thought, like me!"

And desirous to satisfy Marcelle's curiosity about the stranger, and his own as to the sentiments of his guest, he gratified her anxious expectation by entering upon the following details.

The stranger had come on foot, about a fortnight previous. For two days he had wandered about the Black Valley, and then disappeared. Nobody knew where he passed the nights; the miller supposed in the open air. He did not seem to have much money. He had offered, notwithstanding, to pay for his slight repast at the mill, but, upon the miller's refusal, he had thanked him with the simplicity of a man not too proud to accept hospitality from one of his own class. He was dressed neatly, like a workman, or a country bourgeois, in a blouse and a straw hat. He carried a small knapsack on his shoulder, from which he now and then took out paper, and seemed to be making notes. He said he had been at Blanchemont, but nobody there had seen him. Yet he spoke of the farm and the old chateau like a man who had examined everything. While eating his bread and drinking his water, he had asked the miller many questions about the extent of the estate, its mortgages, the character and reputation of the farmer, about the expenditures of the late M. de Blanchemont, about his other estates, etc., so that at the mill they had concluded him to be an agent sent by some purchaser, to collect information and ascertain the quality of the land.

"For it seems that the estate of Blanchemont is to be offered for sale, if it is not already," added the miller, who was not altogether so free from the fever of curiosity prevalent among the neighboring peasants as his mother presumed him.

Marcelle, agitated by a very different solicitude, scarcely heard this last observation.

"How old might this stranger be?" she asked.

"If I could trust to his face," said the miller's mother, "about as old as Louis,—near twenty-three or four."

"And—how was his face? Was he dark, of middling height?"

"He was not tall, and he was not fair," said the miller; "his face was not ill-looking, but pale, as if he were in poor health."

"That might be Henri," thought Marcelle, although this rude portrait poorly answered to the ideal in her heart.

"He is no man to be cheated in business," resumed Grand-Louis; "for to pleasure M. Bricolin, the Blanchemont farmer who wants to buy the estate, and to plague him a little, I diverted myself with undervaluing the property, but the fellow had his eyes open. The estate, says he, is worth so and so; and he counted on his fingers the income, the costs, and the expenses, like one at home in the matter, and with no need of long words and much wine, our country fashion, to see the long and short of a thing."

"Go to—I am wild," thought Mme. de Blanchemont; "this stranger is the first comer—some clerk charged with country investments—and his appearance of melancholy and revery on the bank were simply the consequences of heat and fatigue. Even if it be he who cut the name of Henri, it is very possibly his own. Henri never took thought of business, never knew the value of any property, or the source and management of any of this world's riches. No, no, it is not he. Besides, was he not at

Paris a fortnight ago? It is only three days since I saw him, and he did not tell me that he had lately been away. What should have brought him to the Black Valley? Did he even know that the estate of Blanchemont, of which I never remember to have spoken to him, was situated in this province?"

She turned her mind, not without effort, from the mysterious inscription which had so much excited it, and following her host to the house, she found an excellent breakfast spread upon a massive table, covered with a snow-white cloth. There was frumenty, the favorite dish in that province, a kind of paste made of grain soaked in water and dressed with milk, preserved pears with spiced cream, trout from the Vauvre, broiled chickens, lean and tender, salad with nut oil, and scarcely ripe fruit, all which seemed delicious to Edward. Plates were set for the two servants, and the two hosts, at the same table with Mme. de Blanchemont, and the old woman was much amazed at the refusal of Lapierre and Suzette to sit beside their mistress. Marcelle, however, insisted that they should conform to the habits of the country, and merrily entered upon that life of equality, the thought of which was so agreeable to her. The miller's bearing was rough, frank, but never coarse. The manners of his mother were rather more obsequious; and, in spite of the remonstrances of Grand-Louis, in whom good sense supplied the want of good breeding, she almost persecuted her guests to eat more than sufficed to their appetite, but her urgency was so sincere, that Marcelle did not think of finding fault with it. There was both heart and sense in this old woman, and her son resembled her in both respects. He had, besides, a good elementary education. He had been through the primary schools, and had read and understood much more than he was in haste to show. Marcelle found, on talking with him, greater accuracy of thought, and more sense and natural taste, than she had expected the evening before from the "tall miller" whom she met at the inn. All this was so much the more valuable, because, far from the vanity of showing it off, he even affected a clownish roughness of manner. His chief fear seemed to be to pass for a village wonder; and he had a settled contempt for pretension — for people who try to set themselves above their honest birth and respectable condition. His language was usually correct, though he liked to introduce the easy and picturesque provincialisms of his district. When he quite forgot himself, he talked with perfect ease, and no trace was left of the miller; but soon, as if ashamed of this departure from his sphere, he would resume his harmless pleasantries and unpresuming familiarity.

With all this, Marcelle was somewhat embarrassed when the patachon came, about seven o'clock, to take her directions. She desired, when she took leave of her entertainers, to pay for the expense to which she had put them, but they refused to receive anything.

"No, my dear lady, no," said the miller to her in a quiet but firm voice; "we are not innkeepers. We might be, and it would not be beneath us. But as we are not, we will take nothing from you."

"Nay," said Marcelle, "will you not permit me to indemnify you for all the disturbance and expense I have made you? for I know that your mother gave me her chamber, and took your bed, while you slept in the barn on the hay. You left your work this morning to go and fish. Your mother heated the oven, took considerable trouble, and we must have made quite a hole in your larder."

"Oh, my mother slept very well, and I still better," replied Grand-Louis. "Trout cost me nothing from the Vauvre, and to-day is Sunday, when I always fish all the morning. A little flour, bread, and milk, with some poor poultry, which served for your breakfast, will not ruin us. So the service is nothing great, and you can accept it without uneasiness. We shall never cast it up to you, especially as we may never see you again."

"I hope that you will," replied Marcelle, "for I intend staying some days, at least, at Blanchemont, and I should like to return and thank your mother and yourself for your cordial hospitality, which I am still rather ashamed to accept."

"And why be ashamed to take a little service from honest folks? If you are pleased with our good-will, all is even. I know that, in cities, everything, to a cup of water, is paid for. It is a poor way, and here in the country we should be badly off if we did not help one another. Pray, then, say no more about it."

"Then you would not like to have me come again and ask for some breakfast? You will force me to deny myself that pleasure, or feel myself encroaching upon you?"

"That is another affair. We have only done our duty in showing you what you call hospitality, for we have been brought up to look upon it as a duty; and although the good custom is passing away, and nowadays poor people, without asking to be paid for such little services, take pretty much all that is given them, it is neither my mother's judgment nor mine to change old customs when they are good. If there had been a tolerable inn hereabouts, I would have taken you there last night, thinking you would be better off than with us, and seeing that you were able to pay for what you wanted. But there was none, good or bad; and unless I had been a brute, I could not have let you pass the night out of doors. Do you think I would have asked you to my house if I had thought of letting you pay? No; for, as I tell you, I am no innkeeper. See, there is no sign or bush over our door!"

"I ought to have observed that at first," said Marcelle, "and shown more discretion in my conduct here. But what do you say to my question? You do not wish me to return?"

"That is another affair. I invite you to come back whenever you please. The place suits you, and your little boy likes our cakes, which makes me bold to say that you will do us a pleasure whenever you come."

"And will you oblige me, as you have to-day, to take all *gratis?*"

"When I invite you? Did I express myself so badly?"

"And you do not see that this seems to me like taking too much advantage of your kindness?"

"No, I do not see it. When one is invited, one makes use of one's right to accept."

"Come," said Mme. de Blanchemont, "I see that you have true politeness, a thing not to be had in our world. You have taught me that the caution and reticence of which we boast, and which are unhappily so necessary in society, have taken such high place only since kindness has changed into compliment, and good-breeding is no longer the expression of real sympathy."

"You say well," answered the miller, his face lit up with a ray of quick intelligence; "and by my honest faith, I am very glad to have had the opportunity to oblige you!"

"If so, you will allow me to receive you in my turn when you come to Blanchemont?"

"Ah! pardon me! but I shall not go to your house. I shall go, as I often do, to carry grain to your farmers, and I shall simply have the pleasure of bowing to you."

"Ah! ah! Monsieur Louis, then you will not breakfast with me?"

"Yes, and no. I eat often with your tenants; but there would be a difference, if you were there. You are a noble lady — enough."

"Explain — I do not understand."

"Well, then, have you not preserved the habits of the old nobility? Should you not send your miller to the kitchen to eat with your servants, and certainly without your company? Now I have no objection myself to eating with them, since I did the same thing to-day in my own house; but it would seem odd to me that you should have sat at my table, and I could not sit at yours, or draw my chair by your own, in your chimney-corner. The fact is, I am rather proud. I should not blame you — each one has his own way of thinking and acting — and for that very reason I do not choose to go where I should be obliged to yield to that of another."

Marcelle was much struck with the miller's good sense and sincere hardihood. She felt that he had given her a valuable lesson, and she rejoiced inwardly that her new theory of life permitted her to receive it unabashed.

"Monsieur Louis," she said, "you are mistaken with regard to me. That I am of the nobility is not my fault; but it so happens that, by chance or good fortune, I no longer wish to conform to its customs. If you come to see me, I shall not forget that you received me as your equal and served me as your neighbor; and if it be necessary to show you that I am not ungrateful, I will myself set yours and your mother's place at my table, as you have set mine at yours."

"Would you really do that?" said the miller, fixing his eyes on Marcelle with a mixture of surprise, respectful doubt, and familiar sympathy. "If so, I will go — or rather, no, I will not go, for I can see that you are really kind and good."

"I cannot tell what you mean by that last observation."

"Faith! if you do not understand — I hardly know how to express myself better."

"Come, Louis, I think thou art crazy," said old Marie, who had been gravely knitting through all this conversation. "I do not know where thou hast picked up all that thou sayest to our lady. Your pardon, madam, the boy is a care-for-nought, and has always come right out to everybody, great and small, with all that he happened to think. You must not be angry with him. Believe me, he has a good heart at bottom, and would this minute, I see by his face, fling himself into the fire for you."

"Not so sure of the fire," said the miller, laughing; "but into the water — my element. You can easily see, mother, that the lady is a woman of sense, and one can say what one thinks to her. I say it even to M. Bricolin, her farmer, who is certainly much more to be feared here than she!"

"Say it out, then, Master Louis! I desire information. Why would not you come to visit me because I am kind and good?"

"Because it would be wrong in us to make ourselves familiar with you, and wrong in you to treat us as equals. It would subject you to many disagreeable things. Your equals would blame you, and say that you forgot your rank, and I know that to be a heavy crime in their eyes. And then you would have to be just as kind to others as to us, or the rest would be jealous, and become our enemies. Each one must follow his own course. They say that the world is mightily changed within fifty years, but to my mind nothing is changed but the ideas of people in my rank. We will no longer submit as we have done. Now my mother there, whom, for all that, I love dearly, the good soul, sees things differently from me. But the rich and the nobles hold the same opinions as ever. If you hold them not, if you do not despise common people, but treat them with the same respect that you do your equals, it may be so much the worse for you. I have often seen your late husband, M. de Blanchemont, whom some people continued to call the Lord of Blanchemont. Every year he came to the country for two or three days. He said thee and thou to us. If it had been in friendliness, very well: but it was in contempt, and we must always speak to him standing, and cap in hand. Now this did not suit me at all. One day he met me on the road, and ordered me to hold his horse. I made believe deaf: he called me boor; I looked sideways at him; if he had not been so slender and feeble, I would have let him hear a word or two. But it would have been cowardly, and I went singing on my way. That man could not be pleased if he were living, and heard you speak as you do now to me. Why, look you! I saw to-day, only by your servants' faces, that they thought you too unceremonious with us and themselves. Ay, ay, madam, it is for you to come and revisit the mill, and for us, who love you, not to go and put ourselves at the table of the chateau."

"I forgive you all the rest for that last word, and I think yet to convince you," said Marcelle, offering him her hand, while the noble purity of her countenance commanded respect at the same time that her manner engaged affection. The miller blushed as he received the delicate fingers in his enormous hand, and, for the first time, felt himself timid in Marcelle's presence, like a bold but loving child whose pride is suddenly conquered by tenderness.

"I will mount Sophie, and be your guide to Blanchemont," said he, after a moment of embarrassed silence; "this unlucky patachon would lead you astray again, though it is not far."

"I accept your kindness," said Marcelle; "will you still say that I am proud?"

"I will say, will say," cried Grand-Louis, rushing hastily out, "that if all rich women were like you—"

The end of his sentence was lost, and his mother finished it for him.

"He is thinking," said she, "that if the girl he loves has as little pride as you, he should not be so tormented."

"And could not I be useful to him?" asked Marcelle, with a joyful thought of her wealth and its sacred uses.

"Perhaps, by speaking well of him before the young lady, for you will soon know her. But pshaw! she is too rich!"

"We will talk of it again," said Marcelle, perceiving that her servants had come for her baggage. "I will come back soon, perhaps to-morrow."

The red-headed, scrubbéd patachon had passed the night under a tree, for in the darkness he had not been able to discover any habitation in the Black Valley. At daybreak he had perceived the mill, and there he and his horse had been fed and refreshed, notwithstanding which he was in very ill temper, and quite ready to reply insolently to the reproaches which he expected. But, on the one hand, Marcelle made him none, and on the other, the miller overwhelmed him with so many jeers, that he could not put in a word, and took his place on the shaft in sheepish silence. Little Edward besought his mother to let him ride on horseback before the miller, who took him lovingly in his arms, saying aside to the old woman:

"Such an one would make a gay house for us, mother, eh? But that will never be!"

And the mother understood that he would never marry another than her to whom he could not reasonably aspire.

CHAPTER VII.

BLANCHEMONT.

MARCELLE having embraced Grand-Marie, and privately but amply recompensed the servants at the mill, gayly reëntered the detestable patache. She felt a larger expansion and freedom of spirit from this, her first trial of equality, and the result of her romantic projects appeared to her eyes clothed in the most poetic colors. But the mere sight of Blanchemont cast a shadow over her thoughts, and she had no sooner passed the gate of her domain, than her heart sank within her.

The terrace of Blanchemont is reached by following the road up the river Vauvre, and climbing a rather steep eminence. It is a pretty lawn, shaded by old trees, and commanding a beautiful view, not one of the most extensive in the Black Valley, but gentle and pleasing, over a country which seems uninhabited, on account of the scarcity of its dwellings, and the way in which their roofs, of thatch or brown tile, are hidden among the trees.

The terrace slopes gently toward the river, here flowing in graceful windings, and is surrounded by the low cabins of the hamlet, among which stands a humble church. Thence a broad and stony road leads to the chateau, placed in the midst of green fields, a little below, and in rear of the terrace. From this level the beautiful blue horizons of Berry and La Marche are lost from sight, and become visible only from the second story of the chateau.

This building never possessed great means of defence; its walls are only five or six feet thick at their foundation, and its flanking towers are corbelled. It dates from the end of the feudal wars. Nevertheless, the small size of its doors, the scarcity of windows, and the remains of numerous walls and turrets which once clustered around it, indicate an age of general distrust and precaution. It is built with some elegance, in an oblong form, containing at each story one large room, with four towers enclosing smaller chambers at the angles, and another tower at the back, serving as cage to the solitary staircase. The chapel is isolated by the destruction of the former offices, the moat is partially filled up, the surrounding turrets are broken off midway, and the pond which formerly washed the northern side of the chateau has become a pretty meadow, with a little spring in its centre.

But the attention of the heiress of Blanchemont was not at first occupied by the still picturesque aspect of the old chateau. The miller, in helping her from the carriage, directed her towards what he called the new chateau and the immense farming establishment, situated at the foot of the ancient manor, and close upon a very large court, enclosed on one side by a battlemented wall, and on the other by a hedge, and a ditch full of muddy water. Nothing can be more dismal and disagreeable than this wealthy farmer's dwelling. The new chateau is only a large and ordinary house, built perhaps fifty years since, with the ruins of the old fortifications, but the fresh stucco on its solid walls, and the new tiles, of *screeching red*,* upon the roof, show that it has been lately repaired. This exterior rejuvenation jars with the antiquated look of the other farm-buildings, and the egregious filthiness of the court. These dark buildings, which show traces of ancient architecture, and are solid and well preserved, form a continuous range of barns and stables, the property of one tenant, who is thereby the pride of all the farmers, and the admiration of all the agriculturists of the country round. But the space they enclose, although useful and convenient for the work of the farm, offers a repulsive prospect to the eye. Enormous heaps of manure, sunk in square stone pits, and still rising ten or twelve feet above ground, send forth unclean streams which are allowed to run freely towards the lower land, to improve the vegetables of the kitchen garden. These stores of fatness are the favorite possessions of the farmer. They fill his eye, and swell his heart with pride when a neighbor looks upon them with admiration or envy. In smaller farm-yards, these details are not disagreeable to the artistic eye or mind. Their irregularity, the confusion of farming tools, and the verdure around all, conceal or make them graceful; but on a large scale, and in a broad field, nothing is more disgusting than this all-surrounding filth. Flocks of turkeys, geese, and ducks take care that there shall be no safety in setting one's foot upon any spot spared by the flow from the manure heaps. The ground, bare and uneven, is crossed by a paved way, which at present is no more practicable than the rest, for the remains of the old roofing of the new chateau are scattered everywhere, so that one literally walks upon a field of broken tiles. It is six months, indeed, since the work was finished; but the repairs were at the charge of the owner of the estate, while the expense of carrying away the rubbish and clearing the court belongs to the tenant, who intends to do it when the summer work is over, and his own men can attend to it. On the one hand, he will thus economize several days of his laborers' time, and on the other, he gratifies the heavy apathy of a Berrichon,* who always leaves something unfinished, as if, after any effort, his exhausted activity found repose and the luxury of indolence indispensable before the end of the task.

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* *Rouge criard.* The grotesque strength of the French phrase seems only to be matched by one of our own Western expressions, which I have accordingly used. — *Tr.*

Marcelle compared this coarse and disgusting rustic opulence with the poetic competence of the miller, and would have spoken to him on the subject, if a word could have been heard amid the distressed cries of the turkeys, unluckily rendered immovable by their very terror, the hissing of maternal geese, and the barking of four or five lean, yellow dogs. As it was Sunday, the cattle were in the stables and the laborers hanging about the door, dressed from head to foot in their holiday clothes of dark blue cloth. They stared at sight of the patache, but no one stirred to receive it, or to warn the farmer of the arrival of a visitor. Grand-Louis was obliged to serve as usher to Mme. de Blanchemont, which he did with little ceremony, calling out, as he entered without knocking:

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* Native of the province of Berri.

"See here, Mme. Bricolin! Here is Mme. de Blanchemont come to see you."

The three Bricolin women, who had just returned from mass, and were about to partake, standing, of a slight collation, were so startled by this unexpected news, that they remained stupefied, looking at each other as to ask what was to be said and done in such circumstances; and they had not yet stirred from their places when Marcelle entered. The group before her was composed of three generations. The mother Bricolin, who could neither read or write, and who wore the peasant costume; Mme. Bricolin, the farmer's wife, a little more elegant than her mother-in-law, and looking something like a curate's housekeeper; she could sign her name legibly, and find the times of sunrise, and the phases of the moon, in the Liege almanac; last, Mlle. Rose Bricolin, fair and fresh as a May rose, who knew very well how to read romances, keep the house accounts, and dance a contradance. Her hair was carefully braided, and she wore a dress of rose-colored muslin, fitting perfectly to her beautiful form, which was, however, somewhat injured by the exaggerated length of the waist, and the tight sleeves then in fashion. The expression of her charming face was at once artless and shrewd, and effaced the disagreeable impression which her mother's sharp and crabbed look had made upon Marcelle. The physiognomy of the grandmother was free and open, though she was sunburned and wrinkled, like one who had seen hard work and weather. These three women stood open-mouthed; Mother Bricolin really wondering whether this young and beautiful lady were the same whom she had sometimes seen at the chateau thirty years before — meaning Marcelle's mother, whom, nevertheless, she knew to have been long dead — Mme. Bricolin, the mistress of the house, observing that she had been too hasty on her return from mass, in putting a kitchen apron over her maroon-colored merino dress, and Mlle. Rose, rapidly considering that she was irreproachably clad and shod, and that, thanks to the Sabbath, she could be surprised by a Parisian fine lady without having to blush for any vulgar domestic occupation.

In the eyes of the Bricolin family, Mme. de Blanchemont had always been a problematical being of possible existence, whom they never had seen, and certainly never would see. They had known her lordly husband, who was not loved because he was haughty, not esteemed because he was extravagant, and not at all feared because he was always in need of money, and would have it at any price. Since his death, they had thought to deal only with men of business, as the deceased had often said to them, when producing his wife's complaisant signature, "Mme. de Blanchemont is but a child; she takes no concern in all this, and cares very little where the money comes from, if I only carry her enough." It is to be understood that the husband was accustomed to lay to the charge of his wife's expensive tastes all that he himself lavished upon his mistresses. Thus there was no suspicion of the true character of the young widow, and Mme. Bricolin thought herself dreaming, when she saw her appear in person in the very midst of Blanchemont Farm. Ought she to be glad or sorry? Was this singular apparition of good or evil augury for the prosperity of the Bricolins? Had she come to claim or to sue?

While, a prey to these sudden perplexities, the dame examined Marcelle something as a goat does a strange dog in the flock, Rose Bricolin, suddenly won by the affable air and simple attire of the stranger, had found courage to advance two steps towards her. The grandmother was the least embarrassed of the three. After the first moment of surprise, and when she had exerted her feeble head to understand the state of the case, she approached Marcelle with blunt frankness, and greeted her in almost the same terms that had been used, though with more grace and dignity, by the miller's mother of

Angibault. The two others, reassured by the sweet and gentle manner in which Marcelle requested their hospitality for a few days, that she might, as she said, talk over her affairs with M. Bricolin, soon hastened to offer her breakfast.

The excellent meal which she had taken, an hour before, at the mill of Angibault, was Marcelle's excuse for refusing, and not till then were the eyes of the three Bricolin women turned upon Grand-Louis, who stood near the door, chatting with the servant-maid, for a pretext to stay a little longer. These three looks were very different. The grandmother's was friendly, her daughter-in-law's disdainful, and that of Rose doubtful and indefinable, as if both feelings were secretly mingled in it.

"How!" cried Mme. Bricolin, in a tone of united condolence and scorn, when Marcelle had in few words related her night's adventures, "you were forced to sleep in that mill? And we did not know it! Eh! why did not that stupid miller bring you here at once? Ah, heavens! What a bad night you must have passed, madam!"

"Excellent, on the contrary. I was treated like a queen, and I am a thousand times obliged to M. Louis and to his mother."

"Now that does not astonish me," said the mother Bricolin; "Grand'-Marie is such a fine woman, and keeps her house so neatly! She is my own old friend; we have kept sheep together, saving your presence; we were called two pretty lasses in those days, though you would not think it now, would you, madam? We each knew just about the same things — to spin, and knit, and make cheese, and that was all. We married very differently; she took a man poorer than herself, and I one richer than I was. But both were for love: that was the way in our time; now they marry only for money, and shillings count for more than sentiments. They are none the better for it, are they, Mme. de Blanchemont?"

"I am quite of your opinion," said Marcelle.

"Eh! good conscience, mother, what idle tales are you telling the lady?" sharply resumed Mme. Bricolin.

"Do you think she will be amused with your old stories? Eh! miller!" she added in an imperious voice, "go see if M. Bricolin is in the warren or the oat-field behind the house. Tell him to come and pay his respects to the lady."

"M. Bricolin," answered the miller, with a clear glance and a look of merry bravado, "is neither in his oat-field nor in the warren; I saw him as I passed by, drinking a measure with Monsieur the Curate, at the presbytery."

"Ah, yes," said the grandmother, "he must be at the *precipitary*. Monsieur the Curate is always very hungry and thirsty after high mass, and likes to have company. Say, Louis, my boy, wilt thou go and fetch him, thou art always so obliging?"

"I will go instantly," said the miller, who had not stirred at the command of the farmer's wife; and he ran hastily out.

"If you think him obliging," muttered Mme. Bricolin, looking crossly at her mother-in-law, "you are not hard to please."

"Oh, mamma, that should not be said," spoke pretty Rose Bricolin, with her soft voice; "Grand-Louis is very good-hearted."

"And what is his good heart to you?" returned Mme. Bricolin, with increased indignation. "What has set you both up for him lately?"

"Nay, mamma, it is thou who art unjust towards him of late," replied Rose, who, accustomed to her grandmother's protection, seemed to have no great fear of her mother. "Thou art always rough with him, and yet thou knowest that papa has great esteem for him."

"Thou wouldst do better thyself," said the mistress, "to go, instead of prating, and prepare thy chamber, which is the best ordered in the house, for the lady, who perhaps would like to rest herself before dinner-time. Madame will excuse us if she is not very well lodged here. It was only last year that the late M. de Blanchemont agreed to fit up the new chateau a little, for it was almost as much ruined as the old one; and it was only then, at the renewal of our lease, that we could begin to furnish suitably. Nothing is finished, the papers are not yet put up in the chambers, and we expect bureaux and beds, which have not yet come from Bourges. We have some, too, still unpacked. We are fairly heels-over-head, since the workmen overturned everything."

The domestic disarray which Mme. Bricolin thus detailed in her discourse, sprung from precisely the same causes as that which Marcelle had remarked outside the house. Economy, joined to apathy, induced slow and long expense, and postponed indefinitely the enjoyment of the desired luxury, which, although within their reach, they dared not grasp. The dismal and smoke-blackened room in which they had been surprised by the chatelaine, was the ugliest and dirtiest of the new chateau. It was at once kitchen, eating-room, and parlor. The poultry had access to it through the ever open door, and the care of driving them out was one of the constant occupations of the mistress, whose natural activity and love of discipline were perhaps sustained by the perpetual state of anger and severity in which she was kept by the repeated offences of the fowls. Here were received the peasants who came incessantly on business; and as their muddy feet and the freedom of their habits would inevitably have spoiled a polished floor and fine furniture, only coarse straw chairs and wooden benches were placed upon the bare stone pavement, swept ten times a day, but swept in vain. Swarms of flies, and the fire, which at all hours and in all seasons burned in the huge chimney-place, with its swinging cranes, made it an uncomfortable place in summer. Yet this was the room continually inhabited by the family; and when Marcelle was shown into the next apartment, she saw that the parlor was virgin yet, although it had been furnished for a year. It was decorated with the vulgar finery of a tavern. The new floor had never yet been polished with wax. The showy muslin curtains were hung from detestably ugly copper ornaments. The chimney garniture corresponded to these in glitter and bad taste. A very rich stand, intended for some future coffee-taking, remained, with all its gilded bronzes, wrapped in paper and twine. The furniture was covered with a red and white check, beneath which the worsted damask was destined to wear out without seeing the light; and, as in these farms no distinction is made between parlor and bedroom, two mahogany bedsteads, still uncurtained, were placed facing the window, on the right and left of the door of entrance. It was whispered in the family that this would be Rose's bridal chamber.

Marcelle found this house so disagreeable, that she determined not to stay in it. She declared that she did not wish to cause her hosts the least trouble, and that she would find some peasant's house in the village where she could be lodged, unless there were some habitable chamber in the old chateau. Mme. Bricolin appeared disturbed at this last idea, and spared no pains to turn her guest's mind from it.

"It is very true," she said, "that there is always what we call the 'master's room' in the old chateau. When the baron, your late husband, did us the honor to come here—as he always wrote beforehand, to give us notice—we took care to clean up, that he should not find things so bad. But the poor chateau is so dismal, and so decayed—the rats and the night-birds make a frightful noise inside—and besides, the roofs are so poor, and the walls so tottling, that there is surely no safety in sleeping there. I cannot imagine why the baron had such a fancy for that room. He never would take one with us, and one would have thought that he felt it a disgrace to pass a night elsewhere than under his own old roof."

"I will go and look at the chamber," said Marcelle, "and if it afford a shelter, it will be all I need. Meanwhile, I beg you not to disturb yourselves. I do not wish to give you any trouble whatsoever."

Rose expressed her desire to yield her apartment to Mme. de Blanchemont in so amiable a manner, and with so winning a face, that Marcelle gently pressed her hand to thank her, but adhered to her resolution. The appearance of the new chateau, joined to an instinctive repugnance for Mme. Bricolin, made her obstinate in refusing the hospitality which at the mill she had at last cordially accepted.

She was still declining the dame's ceremonious importunities, when M. Bricolin arrived.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PARVENU PEASANT.

M. BRICOLIN was a man of fifty, robust, and with regular features. But his thick-set limbs were swollen by corpulence, as happens to all well-to-do country bourgeois, who, passing their days in the open air, chiefly on horseback, and leading an active, but not laborious life, have just enough fatigue to keep them in excellent appetite and perfect health. Thanks to the stimulus of continual air and exercise, such men endure daily excess for a long time without suffering from it; but although in their rural occupations their dress is very similar to that of the peasant, they can never be mistaken at the first glance. While the peasant is always thin, well-proportioned, and of a swarthy complexion, which is not without its beauty, the country bourgeois is always, from the age of forty, afflicted with obesity, a heavy bearing, and a vinous coloring of face, which vulgarize and disfigure the finest organization.

Among those who have made their own fortunes, and have begun life by the forced sobriety of the peasant, are found no exceptions to this enlargement of the figure and alteration of the skin. For it is a proverbial observation, that when the peasant begins to eat meat and drink wine freely, he becomes incapable of labor, and the return to his former habits would be infallibly and promptly fatal. It might be said of these men that their money has passed into their blood, that body and soul are bound to it, and that the loss of fortune would cost them life or reason. Every idea of devotion to humanity, every religious conception, is almost incompatible with the transformation produced by wealth in their physical and moral being. It would be useless to feel indignation against them. They cannot be otherwise. They are fattening for apoplexy or imbecility. Their faculties for the acquisition and preservation of wealth, strongly developed at first, are exhausted toward the midst of their career, and after having made a fortune with remarkable skill and rapidity, they fall early into apathy, disorder, and incapacity. No social ideal, no sentiment of progress upholds them. Digestion becomes the business of their lives; and the fortune they have so vigorously acquired is involved, before its consolidation, in a thousand embarrassments, and compromised by a thousand mistakes, not to speak of the vanity which hurries them into speculations beyond their credit, so that each of these rich men is commonly ruined just when he is considered most an object of envy.

M. Bricolin had not yet reached this point. He was at an age when the whole force of his activity and will could still struggle against the double intoxication of pride and intemperance. But one look at his sunken eyes, his huge stomach, his shining nose, and the nervous trembling given to his robust hand by his habit of a morning cup (that is to say, two bottles of white wine fasting), was enough to show that the time was near when this man, now so active and vigilant, so sagacious and so pitiless in business, would lose health, memory, judgment, and even his hard-heartedness, and become an exhausted drunkard, a clumsy braggart, and an easily-cheated master.

His face had been handsome, although entirely destitute of refinement. His compact and strongly-marked features were indicative of uncommon energy and severity. His eye was black, quick and hard; his mouth sensual; forehead low and narrow; his hair crisp, and his speech short and rapid. There was no falseness in his look, nor hypocrisy in his manners. He was not a fraudulent man, and his great respect for *meum* and *tuum*, according to the terms of actual society, made him incapable of cheating. Besides, the cynicism of his cupidity prevented him from veiling his intentions; and when he had said to his neighbor, "My interest is contrary to thine," he considered that his subsequent action was based upon the most sacred right, and looked upon its announcement as a deed of exalted loyalty.

Half bourgeois, half laborer, his Sunday costume was between that of the peasant and the *gentleman*. The form of his hat was lower than that of the one, and it had a narrower brim than that of the other. He wore a gray blouse, gathered in folds around his short waist, so that he looked like a girdled cask. His gaiters smelt unmistakably of the stable, and his black silk cravat was shining and greasy. This short, brusque personage made an unpleasant impression upon Marcelle, and she had still less sympathy with his conversation, which was prolix, and always turning upon money, than with the unpleasing attentions of his better half.

The following is nearly the substance of the two hours' babble which she had to endure from Master Bricolin. The estate of Blanchemont was loaded with mortgages for a large third of its value. The late baron had, beside, demanded considerable advances from his tenant, and paid enormous interest, which M. Bricolin had been *forced to exact*, on account of the difficulty of procuring money, and the usurious rates established in the country. Mme. de Blanchemont would be obliged to submit to still harder conditions, if she chose to continue the system which she had authorized her husband to pursue, or else, before claiming the revenues, she must pay the arrears, capital and interest, and compound interest, altogether more than a hundred thousand francs. As for the other creditors, they desired to receive their entire due, or keep the whole debt as an investment. It had thus become necessary to sell the estate, or to obtain ready money; in a word, the property was worth eight hundred thousand francs, and was encumbered with four hundred thousand francs of debt, without counting that toward M. Bricolin. There remained three hundred thousand francs, henceforth the only fortune of Mme. de Blanchemont, independent of what her husband had or had not left to his son, and of which she was yet ignorant.

Far from foreseeing such great disasters, Marcelle had not imagined the half of them. The creditors had made, as yet, no claim, and, well furnished with their titles, they waited, M. Bricolin at their head, till the widow should inquire into her position, to demand of her entire payment, or the continuation of the revenue assured to them by the loan. When she asked Bricolin why, during a month that she had been a widow, he had not informed her of the state of her affairs, he told her with coarse frankness that he had no reasons for haste, that her credit was good, and that every day of indifference on the side of the owner was a day of profit for the farmer, during which he accumulated the interest of his money without any risk. This peremptory reasoning quickly enlightened Marcelle upon M. Bricolin's species of morality.

"It is just," she answered, with a smile whose irony was beyond the farmer's comprehension. "I see that the fault is mine, if every day that I let slip devours more than my expected income. But, for my son's interest, I must put a stop to this kind of sliding-scale, and I expect from you, M. Bricolin, good counsel on this subject."

M. Bricolin, much amazed at the composure with which the lady of Blanchemont had just received the information that she was very nearly ruined, and still more at the confidence with which she consulted him, looked full in her face. He saw in her eyes a sort of arch defiance, given by absolute candor to his cupidity.

"I see plainly," said he, "that you are trying me, but I have no desire to expose myself to blame from your family. It is injurious to a man to be accused of interested acquiescence in usurious rates. I must speak with you seriously, Mme. de Blanchemont, but these walls are too thin, and what I have to say must not be rumored abroad. If you will pretend to go and examine the old chateau with me, I will tell you, first, what I should advise you to do if I were your relation, and secondly, what, being your creditor, I desire that you should do. You will see if there is any third course; I think not."

If the old chateau had not been surrounded by brambles, foul and stagnant pools, and a quantity of rubbish which gave it an appearance of barbarous disorder, it would have been a picturesque relic of the past. Part of the moat was filled with tall reeds, and one face of the building, including a breach in the wall where some wild cherry-trees had attained a magnificent growth, was covered with a superb ivy. This side was truly poetic. M. Bricolin showed Marcelle the chamber which her husband had been accustomed to inhabit on his visits; it contained some remains of furniture in the style of Louis XVI., very dirty, and much faded. Nevertheless the room was habitable, and Mme. de Blanchemont resolved to pass the night there.

"That will rather vex my wife, who counted on the honor of receiving you with her new furniture," said M. Bricolin; "but I know nothing more ill-mannered than to tease people. If the old chateau please you, there is no disputing on taste, as the saying is, and I will have your baggage brought here. A cot shall be put in this closet for your maid. Meanwhile, I must speak seriously to you of your affairs, Mme. de Blanchemont. That is the first thing to do."

And, drawing up an arm-chair, Bricolin seated himself and began thus:

"First, allow me to ask if you have of your own any other fortune than the estate of Blanchemont? I think not, if I am rightly informed."

"I have nothing else of my own," replied Marcelle quietly.

"And do you think that your son inherits much fortune in right of his father?"

"I know nothing about it. If M. de Blanchemont's estates are as heavily burdened as mine —"

"Ah! you know nothing about it? You never attend, then, to your affairs? That is odd! But all the nobility are so. Now as for me, I am obliged to know your situation. It is my business and my interest. Well then, seeing that the late baron lived at a grand rate, and not foreseeing that he would die so young, it was necessary to assure myself of the holes he had made in his fortune, so as to be on my guard against loans which might in time have exceeded the value of this land, and left me without security. So I have had the proper people on the lookout, and I know to a sou what remains, in *these days of ours*, to your little man."

"Do me the pleasure to inform me, Monsieur Bricolin."

"It is easily done, and you can verify it. If I am wrong by ten thousand francs, that is the outside. Your husband had about a million, and that remains in appearance, except that there are nine hundred and eighty or ninety thousand francs of debts to pay."

"Then my son has nothing?" said Marcelle, disturbed by this new revelation.

"As you say. With what you possess he will yet have three hundred thousand francs some day. It is still a pretty property if you will collect and free it. In land, it will bring in six or seven thousand francs of rent. If you live on the capital, it is still prettier."

"I do not intend to destroy my son's only future fortune. My duty is to free myself as much as possible from my present embarrassment."

"In that case, see here; your estates and his bring you in two per cent. You are paying fifteen and twenty per cent. on your debts; with the accumulated interest, you will soon greatly increase the capital of the debts. What will you do?"

"I must sell, must I not?"

"As you will. I believe it is your best way, unless, nevertheless, as you have for some time the use of your son's property, you should not prefer making your own profit of the disorder."

"No, M. Bricolin, I have no such intention."

"But you might still draw upon this fortune for money, and as the boy has grandparents who will leave him something, he would not be bankrupt when he came of age."

"The argument is good," said Marcelle, coldly, "but I choose a very different course. I will sell everything, so that the liabilities of the inheritance may not exceed the capital; and as for my own property, I will free it, to provide means for the suitable education of my son."

"In this case, you wish to sell Blanchemont?"

"Yes, M. Bricolin, immediately."

"Immediately? I should think so. For one in your position, who wishes to clear one's self, there is not a day to lose, since each day makes a hole in the purse. But do you think it an easy thing to sell an estate of such importance immediately, either as a whole, or in divisions? As well say that by to-morrow you could build a chateau like this, solid enough to last five or six hundred years. You must know that in *these days of ours*, funds are invested only in manufactures, in railroads, and other great concerns, where there is cent. per cent. to lose or gain. As for real estate, it is the devil to get rid of. In our country, everybody wants to sell it, and nobody will buy, because they are tired of burying heavy capital in furrows where they reap only a slender income. Real estate is good for one who resides upon it, lives by it, and lays up money; that is the life of country folks like me. But it is a miserable revenue to you city people. And so you would see an estate worth fifty, or at most a hundred thousand, find eager purchasers among men like me. Our means are seldom equal to a purchase worth eight hundred thousand francs, and your Paris notary would have to look up a capitalist with more money than he knows what to do with. Do you imagine there are many such nowadays, when a thousand larger games are open, the exchange, the roulette table, railroad bonds, and government places? You must come across some timid old noble who had rather place his money at two per cent., for fear of a revolution, than to plunge into the splendid speculations which tempt everybody in *these days of ours*. And then a handsome house would be essential, where the old proprietor could finish his days. But you see your chateau? I would not take it for the building materials. The rotten wood and broken stone would not pay for the trouble of pulling it down. So that you might, indeed, by advertising your estate, sell it entire any morning; but you might as likely wait ten years, for though your notary should put upon his placards, according to custom, that it pays three and three and a half per cent., my lease will be seen, and show, that deducting the taxes, it does not pay two."

"Your advances to M. de Blanchemont were, perhaps, a consideration in the drawing up of your lease?" said Marcelle, smiling.

"Just so," returned Bricolin, bluntly, "and my lease is for twenty years; one is gone—that leaves nineteen. You know all about it, you signed it. Perhaps you did not read it, after all. Faith! that was your fault."

"True—I complain of no one. And it seems I can neither sell by wholesale or retail?"

"By retail, you will sell well; you will sell dear; but you will not be paid."

"How so?"

"Because you will be forced to sell to a crowd of people, of whom the greater number will not be solvent; to peasants who, at the best, will pay by instalments of a sou at a time; and to beggars led away by the fancy of possessing a bit of land, as everybody does in *these days of ours*, and whom you will be obliged to turn out at the end of ten years, without recovering anything. You would not like to distrain them?"

"I could never bring myself to it. So, M. Bricolin, according to you, I can neither keep nor sell?"

"If you will be moderate, not sell dear, and want ready money, you can sell to somebody I know."

"Who?"

"Me."

"You, Monsieur Bricolin?"

"Me, Nicolas Etienne Bricolin."

"In truth," said Marcelle, who at this moment recalled some words she had heard drop from the Miller of Angibault, "I have heard of this before. And what are your proposals?"

"I will arrange everything with your mortgagees; I will cut up the estate, sell to these, buy of those, keep what I like, and pay you the rest."

"And will you pay the creditors ready money too? You are immensely rich, M. Bricolin!"

"No, I shall make them wait, and, in one way or another, I will rid you of them."

"I thought they were all impatient to be paid; did you not tell me so?"

"They would be exacting with you, but they will allow me credit."

"Right. Perhaps they consider me insolvent?"

"Possibly! *In these days of ours*, people are very suspicious. Let us see, Mme. de Blanchemont: you owe me one hundred thousand francs; I will give you two hundred and fifty thousand, and we are quits."

"That is to say, you would pay me two hundred and fifty thousand francs for what is worth three hundred thousand?"

"It is fair that you should give me this little *bonus;* I pay ready money. You may say it is for my own advantage to avoid the interest, having the money by me; but it is as much for your advantage to have the cash in hand, for, if you wait, you will see neither sou nor centime of it."

"Thus you will profit by the embarrassment of my situation to take a sixth of what is left to me?"

"I have a right to do so, and anybody else would exact more. You may be sure that I will attend to your interests as much as possible. Well, my first word is my last. You will consider it."

"Yes, M. Bricolin, it appears to me to require consideration."

"Faith! I believe it does! You must first make sure that I do not deceive you, and am not deceived myself, as to your position and property. You are here now; you will take information, see everything for yourself; you can even visit your husband's estates at Blanc; and, when you are prepared, say in a month, you will give me your answer. Only, in thinking of my offer, you may establish your calculations with certainty upon this basis: you may indeed, in the first place, make a net sale at double the price I offer, but you will not get half of it, at least not these ten years, in which time the interest you have to pay will swallow it up; or, in the second place, you may sell to me at the loss of a sixth, and receive within three months two hundred and fifty thousand francs in fine gold or silver, or good bank-notes, as you choose. There, I have done! Now let us go back to the house, and in less than an hour dinner will be ready. You must make yourself entirely at home with us, you see, my lady baroness. We are on business, and unless you should call for the *other pint stoup*, it is a trifle."

Marcelle's position with the Bricolins removed all scruple from her mind, and indeed made the acceptance of the invitation necessary. She promised to avail herself of it, but desired to stay at the old chateau to write a letter in the intermediate hour, and M. Bricolin left her to send her servants and baggage.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND.

DURING the few moments that she was left alone, Marcelle made many rapid reflections, and soon felt that she derived an energy from love which nothing but this all-powerful inspiration could have supplied. She had been a little frightened by the first sight of the forlorn manor, the only dwelling she possessed; but when she learned that even this ruin would not long be hers, she smiled, and began to look upon it with simple and disinterested curiosity. The lordly escutcheon of her family was still uninjured over the huge chimney-place.

"And now," she said to herself, "all will soon be broken between me and the past. Riches and nobility fade together, in *these days of ours*, as this Bricolin says. O my God! be Thou praised for having made love for all time, and immortal as Thyself!"

Suzette came, bringing her mistress's writing materials; but as she opened them, Marcelle chanced to turn her eyes upon her waiting-maid, and could not help laughing at the strange expression with which she contemplated the bare walls of the old chateau. Suzette's face grew darker, and her voice had a decided tone of revolt as she said: "Madame is determined to sleep here?"

"You see that I am," replied Marcelle, "and here is a closet for you, with a magnificent view and plenty of air."

"I am much obliged to madame, but madame may be sure that I shall not sleep there. I am frightened here in broad daylight, and what will it be at night? They say that he walks here, and I can easily believe it."

"Nonsense, Suzette. I will protect you from ghosts."

"Madame will have the goodness to let one of the women on the farm sleep here, for I would set off on foot to get out of this dreadful country — "

"You are tragic, Suzette. I will not constrain you in the least, you shall sleep where you like; but you must understand that if you are in the habit of refusing me your services, I shall be under the necessity of parting with you."

"If madame expects to stay long in this country, and live in this dungeon —"

"I am obliged to stay here a month, and perhaps more; what will you decide?"

"I will ask madame to please to send me to Paris, or to some other of her estates, for I can take my oath that I shall die here before three days."

"My dear Suzette," replied Marcelle, with great gentleness, "I have no other estate, and it is not likely that I shall ever again live in Paris. I have no longer a fortune, my child; and it is probable that I could not keep you much longer in my service. Since you dislike this place, it would be useless to keep you here for some days only. I will pay you your wages and your expenses. The patache which brought us has not gone back. I will give you a good recommendation, and my relations will help you to find a place."

"But how does madame expect that I should go off all alone? It was taking a deal of pains, truly, to bring me so far into this lost country."

"I did not know that I was ruined, and I have but just learned it," replied Marcelle, calmly; "make me no reproaches; it is against my will that I have given you this vexation. Besides, you will not go alone; Lapierre will return to Paris with you."

"Will madame dismiss Lapierre too?" asked Suzette, in consternation.

"I do not dismiss Lapierre. I return him to my mother-in-law, who lent him to me, and will be glad to take back the good old man Go and dine, Suzette, and prepare to start."

Confounded by the composure and quiet sweetness of her mistress, Suzette burst into tears, and in a quick, and perhaps unreflective return of affection, besought that she would forgive and retain her.

"No, my dear child," replied Marcelle, "your wages are henceforth beyond my means. I regret you, notwithstanding your whims, and perhaps you will also regret me, notwithstanding my failings. But it is a necessary sacrifice, and the present time is not one for weakness."

"And what will become of madame? without fortune, or servants, and with a young child, in such a desert? Poor little Edward!"

"Do not be troubled, Suzette; you will certainly find a place with some one of my acquaintance. We shall meet again. You will see Edward again. Do not cry before him, I beg of you."

Suzette went out, but Marcelle had not yet dipped her pen in the ink, when the tall miller appeared before her, carrying Edward on one arm, and a carpet-bag on the other.

"Ah!" said Marcelle, as he put the child in her lap, "you are always busy obliging me, M. Louis. I am very glad that you have not gone. I had scarcely thanked you, and I should have been sorry not to say good-by."

"No, I am not gone," said the miller, "and to say the truth, I am in no hurry to be off. But see, madam, if it is the same to you, do not call me *monsieur*. I am not a gentleman, and from you this ceremony annoys me. Call me Louis, or Grand-Louis, as everybody does."

"But I must remind you that this will be contrary to equality, and that after what you said this morning — "

"This morning I was a brute, a horse, and a mill-horse, which is worse. I was prejudiced — on account of your nobility and your husband — how do I know? If you had called me Louis, I believe I should have called you — what is your name?"

"Marcelle."

"I like that name, — Madame Marcelle! Ah, well!

I will call you so; that will not remind me of the baron."

"But if I do not call you monsieur, you will call me plain Marcelle," said Mme. de Blanchemont.

"No, no, you are a woman, and one in a thousand — the devil take me! Hold, I will not deny it, I have you in my heart, especially for the last few moments."

"Why for the last few moments, Grand-Louis?" asked Marcelle, who had begun to write, and only half heard the miller.

"Because while you were talking with your maid just now, I was on the stairs with your rogue of a boy, who played a thousand pranks to keep me from going on, and I heard all you said in spite of myself. I ask your pardon."

"There is no harm in that," said Marcelle; "my position is no secret, since I tell it to Suzette; and if it were, I am sure that a secret would be well placed in your hands."

"Your secrets would be placed in my heart," returned the miller with emotion. "So then you did not know, till you came here, that you were ruined?"

"No, I did not know it. It was M. Bricolin who told me. All I expected were reparable losses."

"And you are no more sorry than this?"

Marcelle, who was now writing, did not reply; but, looking up after a moment, she saw Grand-Louis standing before her, his arms crossed, and his eyes fixed upon her with a kind of simple enthusiasm and profound wonder.

"Is it so astonishing," said she to him, "to see a person lose her fortune without losing her senses? Besides, have I not enough left to live upon?"

"I know pretty well what you have left. I am perhaps better acquainted with your affairs than you are, for Father Bricolin loves to talk when he has drank his cup, and he tired me to death with all this business, when I did not care a straw for it. But it is all the same. A person who does not wince at seeing a million on one side and half a million on the other go from her — crac!

—in a twinkling! I never saw such a thing, and I do not understand it now."

"You would be still more puzzled if I told you that, as far as I am concerned, it gives me great pleasure."

"Ah! but on your son's account!" said the miller, lowering his voice, that the boy, playing in the next room, should not hear.

"I was somewhat alarmed at the first moment," said Marcelle, "but I soon comforted myself. For a long time I have felt it a misfortune to be born rich, and be destined to idleness, and the hatred of the poor, and the selfish immunities of wealth. I have often been sorry not to be the daughter and mother of laborers. Now, Louis, I shall be one of the people, and men like you will be no longer suspicious of me."

"You will not be one of the people," said the miller; "you have still a fortune which they would look upon as immense, though it be not much for you. Besides, this little one has rich relations, who will not suffer him to be brought up in poverty. So these are all romances of yours, Madame Marcelle; but where the deuce did you get these ideas? You must needs be a saint, the devil take me! It sounds very strange to hear you say such things when all other people of wealth only think of getting more. You are the first of your kind that I have seen. Are there other rich and noble persons at Paris who think as you do?"

"There are none, I must confess. But do not give me so much credit, Grand-Louis. The day may come when I can make you understand why I feel thus."

"Excuse me, but I suspect."

"No."

"True, and the proof is that I cannot tell you. These are delicate matters, and you would tell me that I was too bold to question you upon them. Yet if you knew how shamefaced I am upon this chapter, and how capable of comprehending the pains of others! I will tell my own troubles. Yes, thunder! that I will. Only you and my mother shall know. You will say some good words to me, which will restore my senses."

"And what if I told you, in my turn, that I suspect?"

"You ought to suspect! That shows that love and money are mixed up in all these things."

"I desire your confidence, Grand-Louis; but here comes my old Lapierre. We shall meet soon again, shall we not?"

"We must," said the miller, lowering his voice, "for I have many things to ask you about your affairs with Bricolin. I am afraid the old fellow is too hard upon you; and who knows but, peasant as I am, I may be of some service to you? Will you treat me as a friend?"

"Certainly."

"And you will do nothing without letting me know?"

"That I promise you, my friend. Here is Lapierre."

"Must I go?"

"Stay in the other room with Edward. I may have need of your advice, if you have some minutes more to spare."

"It is Sunday — and then I would have if it were any other day."

CHAPTER X.

CORRESPONDENCE.

LAPIERRE entered. Suzette had already told him everything. He was pale and trembling. Old, and incapable of laborious service, he was only a kind of escort for Marcelle on her journey. But without ever having expressed it, he was strongly attached to her, and notwithstanding the dislike which he, as well as Suzette, felt for the Black Valley and the old chateau, he refused to quit his mistress, and declared that he would serve her for whatever wages she should think proper to give him.

Touched by his noble devotion, Marcelle affectionately pressed his hand, and overcame his resistance by proving to him that he could be more useful to her by returning to Paris than by staying at Blanchemont. She wished to dispose of her rich furniture, and Lapierre was well qualified to preside over the sale, receive the proceeds, and apply them to the settlement of what small running accounts Mme. de Blanchemont might have left at Paris. Upright and intelligent, Lapierre was flattered with playing the part of a confidential agent, and with rendering a service to the mistress from whom he reluctantly separated. The arrangements for departure were then made. Here Marcelle, who thought of all the details of her situation with remarkable coolness, summoned Grand-Louis, and asked him if he thought that the carriage she had left at * * * could be sold in the neighborhood.

"So you are burning your ships?" answered the miller. "All the better for us! Perhaps you will stay here; and I ask no better than to keep you. I often go to * * * on business, and to see one of my sisters, who is settled there, so that I know pretty much all that is going on; and I see that for some years past all our bourgeois are used to fine carriages and all sorts of luxury. I know a man who thinks of sending for one to Paris. Now yours is already here, which will save him the freight, and with us, people are very careful in little savings, even while extravagant in great follies. Your carriage seemed to me good and handsome. How much is such a thing worth?"

"Two thousand francs."

"Would you like me to go to * * * with M. Lapierre? I will introduce him to the purchasers, and he will receive the price; for it is only strangers who can get ready money from us."

"If it were not for encroaching upon your time and kindness, you could do the business alone."

"I will go with pleasure. But do not speak of it to M. Bricolin; he would want to buy it himself the next thing."

"Well, why not?"

"Oh, pshaw! that would be all that is wanting to turn his — all his family's heads! Besides, Bricolin would find some way to pay you only half its value. I will take charge of it."

"If so, will you bring me the money, if possible? for I expected to receive some here, instead of which I shall doubtless have some to pay."

"Very well, we will start this evening; that will not disturb me, because it is Sunday; and if I do not come back to-morrow evening or next day morning with two thousand francs, call me a braggart."

"How good you are!" said Marcelle, thinking of the rapacity of her wealthy farmer.

"Shall I bring you your trunks, too, that you left over there?" asked Grand-Louis.

"If you will be so good as to hire a cart and send them to me —"

"No, no; where's the use of hiring a man and horse? I will put Sophie to the wagon, and I will warrant that Mlle. Suzette had rather ride in the open air on a bundle of straw, with a good driver like me, than with that crazy patachon in his salad-basket. Stay a minute! that is not all. You must have a maid; M. Bricolin's are too busy to amuse your rogue of a child from morning till night. Ah! if I had only time myself, we would lead a merry life together, for I adore children, and this one has more wit than I! I will lend you little Fanchon, my mother's maid-servant. We can do without her very well for a while. She will guard him like the apple of her eye, and will do all you bid her. Her only fault is that she will say '*Ma'am?*' three times, at every word you speak to her. But what would you have? She thinks it polite, and would expect a scolding if she did not pretend to be deaf."

"You are my good angel," said Marcelle; "and in my very embarrassing situation, it is wonderful that I should find such a kind heart to help me."

"Bah! bah! these are little friendly services, which you will return in some way or other. You have already done me a great kindness, without suspecting it, since you came here."

"How so?"

"We will talk of it by-and-by," said the miller with a mysterious look, and with a smile in which the earnestness of his passion made a strange contrast with the gayety of his character.

The departure of the miller and the domestics having been fixed, by common consent, for the same evening, *in the cool*, as Grand-Louis said, Marcelle, having only a few moments before the dinner-hour, wrote in haste the two following letters:

LETTER I.

"MARCELLE, *Baroness of Blanchemont, to the Countess of Blanchemont, her mother-in-law:*

"DEAR MAMMA,—I address myself to you as the bravest of women and the best head in the family, to announce to you, and to desire you to announce to the worthy count and to the rest of our dear relatives, a piece of news which will, I am sure, affect you more than it does me. You have too often shared with me your apprehensions, and we have talked too much on the subject now before me, for you not to understand me at the first hint. *Of Edward's fortune, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, left.* Of mine, there remains two hundred and fifty thousand or three hundred thousand francs. I still know my situation only through a man who would be interested in exaggerating, if the thing were possible, the disaster, but who has too much sense to attempt to deceive me, when to-morrow, or the day after, I can procure my own information. I send good Lapierre back to you, and need not urge you to take him again. You gave him to me for the purpose of keeping some order and economy in my household expenses. He did his best; but of what avail was the domestic saving, when the prodigality without was so uncontrolled and boundless? Certain reasons, which he will himself explain to you, oblige me to hasten his departure, and this makes me write to you so hastily, and without entering into details, of which I am not yet entirely mistress, and which you shall have later. I depend upon Lapierre's seeing you alone and giving you this, so that you may have some hours, or days, as you need, to prepare the count for this revelation. You will soften it to him by repeating what you know of me, how indifferent I am to the enjoyment of wealth, and how utterly incapable of saying evil of any person or anything in the past. How can I help pardoning him who was so unhappy as not to live long enough to repair his errors? Dear mamma, let his memory receive full and easy absolution from your heart and mine!

" Now, two words about Edward and myself, who are only one in this stroke of destiny. I shall have enough left, I hope, to provide for his support and education. He is not old enough to mourn over losses of which he is ignorant, and of which he had better be left ignorant, as far as possible, till he is capable of understanding them. Is it not fortunate for him that this change in his circumstances has happened before a luxurious life had become a necessity to him? If it be a misfortune to be reduced to mere necessaries, (and it is not so in my eyes,) he will not feel it, and, accustomed henceforth to a modest way of life, he will think himself sufficiently rich. Since he was destined to fall into moderate circumstances, it is a kindness of Providence to bring him to them at an age when the lesson, far from being bitter, can be only useful to him. You will tell me that other inheritances are in store for him. I know nothing of these possibilities, and have no desire to profit by them. I should refuse almost as an insult the sacrifices which his family might impose upon themselves to procure me what is called an honorable life. In the apprehension of what I have just learned, I had already formed a plan of conduct. I am now confirmed in it, and nothing in the world shall make me depart from it. I am resolved to establish myself in the depths of the country, where I will accustom my boy's first years to a simple and laborious life, and where he will have neither the sight, nor the contact of others' riches, to destroy the good effect of my example and my lessons. I do not give up the hope of sometimes presenting him to you, and you will take pleasure in seeing a robust and merry child, instead of the frail, dreamy creature for whose existence we never ceased to tremble. I know your rights over him, and the respect I owe to your desires and your advice; but I hope that you will not censure my project, and that you will leave to me the guidance of a childhood in which a mother's assiduous cares and the healthful country influences will be of more use than superficial lessons from a fat-salaried professor, gymnasium exercises, and drives to the Bois de Boulogne. Do not be concerned as to me; I have no regrets for my easy life and its indolent appliances. I love the country passionately, and I shall occupy the long hours of which the world will no longer rob me, in instructing myself, that I may teach my son. You have always had some confidence in me, and the time is come when I must ask for entire trust. I venture to expect it, knowing that you have only to question your own energetic soul and deeply maternal heart to comprehend my designs and resolutions.

"All this may meet with opposition in the minds of the family, but when you have once pronounced me right, all will agree with you. Thus I place our present and our future in your hands, and I am, with devotion, tenderness, and respect,

"Yours for life, MARCELLE."

A postscript followed relative to Suzette, and a request to have the family man of business sent to Blanc, to verify the ruin of the property there, and take prompt measures for its settlement. As to her personal affairs, Marcelle could and would arrange them herself, with the assistance of competent men on the spot.

The second letter was addressed to Henri Lemor.

LETTER II.

"WHAT joy and happiness, Henri! I am ruined. You will never more reproach me for my wealth, never more hate my gilded chains. I am again a woman whom you can love without remorse, and who can make no sacrifices for you. My son has no rich inheritance, at least for the present. I have henceforth the right to bring him up in your views, to make a *man* of him, to confide his education, and to deliver his entire being to you. I will not deceive you, we may have a little struggle with his father's family, who, in their blind tenderness and aristocratic pride, would restore him to the world by enriching him in spite of me. But we will triumph by means of gentleness, a little tact, and a good deal of firmness. I shall keep far enough from their influence to paralyze it, and we will enfold the development of this young spirit with a sweet mystery. It shall be the childhood of Jupiter in the recesses of the sacred grottos. And when he leaves this divine retreat to try his strength, when he is tempted by wealth, we shall have made his soul strong against worldly seduction, and the corruption of gold. Henri, I am cradled in the sweetest hopes; do not destroy them by cruel doubts, and scruples which I should now call pusillanimous. You owe me your support and your protection, now that I am about to isolate myself from a kind and solicitous family, which I resist and leave for this only reason, that they do not share your principles. What I wrote to you two days since, on quitting Paris, is thus fully and easily confirmed by this note. I do not call you to me now, I ought not; and prudence, too, exacts that I should remain without seeing you, long enough to exclude the possibility of any one's attributing my self-imposed exile to my feeling for you. I do not tell you what retreat I shall choose, I am myself ignorant. But in a year, Henri, dear Henri, in a year from the fifteenth of August, you will rejoin me from wheresoever I call you. Till then, unless you share my confidence in myself, I had rather that you should not write to me — but shall I have strength to live a year without knowing anything of you? No, nor you either. Write me two words, only to say, *I live and I love!* And direct to the care of my faithful old Lapierre, at the Hotel de Blanchemont. Adieu, Henri! Oh! if you could read my heart, and see how much more worthy I am than you think! Edward is well, and does not forget you. He alone will speak to me of you now. "M. B."

Having sealed these two letters, Marcelle, whose only remaining vanity lay in the angelic beauty of her boy, arranged Edward's dress a little, and crossed the farm-yard. Dinner was waiting for her, and, in her honor, served in the parlor, since there was no other eating-room save the kitchen, which Mme. Bricolin, who herself cooked with the help of her mother-in-law and her servant, found most convenient, and where there was no danger of injuring the furniture. Marcelle soon perceived this variation from the habits of the family. Mme. Bricolin, whose civility was instinctively tinged with that ill-humor which is the essence of ill-breeding, took pains to make her aware of it, by continually asking pardon for the poor attendance on table, and the confusion of her servants. Marcelle requested and insisted that they should henceforth resume their regular customs, declaring, with a gay smile, that she would go and dine at the mill of Angibault if they treated her ceremoniously.

"And speaking of the mill," said Mme. Bricolin, after some strained expressions of politeness, "I must scold M. Bricolin. Ah, there he is! Now say, M. Bricolin, hast thou lost thy wits, to ask this miller to dine with us on a day when the lady baroness does us the honor to accept our repast?"

"Ah, the devil! I never thought," answered the farmer, candidly; "or rather—I thought when I invited Grand-Louis, that madame would not do us that honor. My lord baron always refused, thou knowest; he was served in his chamber, which, by the way, was very inconvenient—in short, Thibaude, if it annoys madame to eat with the boy, thou shalt tell him so; thou dost not keep thy tongue in velvet. I will have nothing to do with it; I made the folly—it is not my business to mend it."

"And it is mine, as usual," said sharp Mme. Bricolin, who, as the eldest of the Thibault girls, retained her family name with a feminine termination, according to the ancient usage of the country. "Come, I will pack thy fine Louis home again!"

"You would give me much pain by so doing, and I believe I should go away myself," said Mme. de Blanchemont in a firm and even severe tone, which imposed respect on the dame; "I breakfasted this morning with this young man, at his own house, and found him so obliging, so polite, and so amiable, that I should really be sorry to dine without him this afternoon."

"Indeed!" said the lovely Rose, who had listened to Marcelle with much attention, and whose eyes expressed mingled surprise and pleasure; but she lowered them and blushed, on meeting the scrutinizing and menacing look of her mother.

"It shall be as madame pleases," said Mme. Bricolin; and she added, in an under tone, to her servant, who was favored with her confidential observations when she was angry:

"See what it is to be a handsome man!"

La Chounette (diminutive for Fanchon) smiled with a knowing look, which made her uglier than usual. She in reality thought the miller a very handsome man, and had a grudge against him for not making love to herself.

"Come then!" said M. Bricolin, "the miller shall dine with us. Madame is right not to be proud. It is always the way to make friends. Rose, go and call Grand-Louis in the court. Tell him the soup is on the table. I should have been sorry to affront the boy. Do you know, my lady baroness, that I have reason to stand up for this miller? He is the only one who does not keep double measure, and does not change the grain. Yes, the only one in the country, the devil take me! Each one of them is a greater thief than the other; besides, the country proverb says, 'Catch a miller, catch a thief.' I have tried them all, and find only this one who does not make false accounts and vile mixtures. And then he is attentive in every way to us. He never grinds my wheat on stones that have just been used for rye or barley. He knows that it spoils the flour, and makes it dark. He piques himself on pleasing me, because he knows that I depend on having beautiful bread on my table. That is my one vanity! I am mortified if any one comes here and does not say, 'Ah! what fine bread! It takes you, Master Bricolin, to raise such grain.'"

"Your bread is certainly magnificent," said Marcelle, as much to praise the miller as to satisfy M. Bricolin's vanity.

"Dear heart! what a fuss for a speck more or less in the bread, and for a bushel more or less a week!" cried Mme. Bricolin. "When we have millers much nearer, and a mill at the foot of the terrace, to do business with a man who lives a league off!"

"What is it to thee?" said her spouse, "since he comes for the sacks and brings them back without taking a handful beyond his toll?* Besides, he has a fine, good mill, two great new wheels, a famous reservoir, and never wants for water. It is pleasant never to wait."

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*The millers in the Black Valley are never paid; they take their toll of the corn with more or less fidelity, and are generally more honest than M. Bricolin allows. When they have much custom, they make more than their living by their business, and can open a small trade in grain.

"And then, as he comes so far," said the dame, "you always think yourself obliged to ask him to dinner or supper. Fine economy!"

The entrance of the miller put an end to this conjugal dispute. M. Bricolin contented himself, when his wife scolded, with shrugging his shoulders, and talking a little quicker than usual. He forgave her crabbed humor because her active and parsimonious management was of great use to him.

"Come, Rose," cried Mme. Bricolin to her daughter, who returned with Grand-Louis, "we are waiting for thee to go to table. Thou mightst have sent for the miller by La Chounette, instead of running thyself."

"My father bid me," said Rose.

"And I am sure you would not have come without," said the miller, in a low voice, to the young girl.

"Is that my thanks for being scolded on your account?" replied Rose, in the same tone.

Marcelle did not hear what they said, but these stolen words exchanged between them, the blushes of Rose and the emotion of Grand-Louis, confirmed her in her suspicion of the cause of Mme. Bricolin's aversion for the poor fellow; the fair Rose was the object of the thoughts of the Miller of Angibault.

CHAPTER XI.

DINNER AT THE FARM.

DESIROUS to advance the interests nearest the heart of her new friend, and seeing no danger in it for Mlle. Bricolin, since her father and grandmother appeared to favor Grand-Louis, Mme. de Blanchemont took pains to make him talk during the meal, and to turn the conversation upon subjects on which his information and intelligence made him very superior to all the Bricolin family, perhaps even to the charming Rose. Upon agriculture, considered as a natural science rather than as a commercial speculation; politics, considered as an endeavor after happiness and human justice; upon religion and morals, Grand Louis's ideas were elementary, but just, lofty, stamped with good sense and a perspicacity and nobleness of spirit, never before brought to light at the farm. The Bricolins had only coarsely vulgar subjects of conversation, and all their wit was spent in scandalous and uncharitable talk about their neighbors. Grand-Louis, liking neither commonplaces nor scandal, spoke little when there, and had never manifested his powers. M. Bricolin had settled it that, like all handsome men, he was dull; and Rose, who had always seen her lover fearful and depressed, that is, shamefaced and bashful, could only excuse his want of spirit by boasting of his excellent heart. Thus they were at first amazed at seeing Mme. de Blanchemont talk with him from choice, and then still more amazed to hear him speak so well. M. Bricolin, who, unsuspicious of his love for his daughter, listened to him with pleasure, was five or six times so much astonished as to strike on the table and cry:

"Thou knowest that, too! Where the devil didst thou fish that up?"

"Bah! in the river!" gayly returned Grand-Louis.

Mme. Bricolin fell by degrees into sullen silence, as she saw her enemy's success, and she determined to warn M. Bricolin that very evening of the discovery she had, or thought she had made, respecting the sentiments of this peasant for his daughter.

As to the old mother, she understood nothing of the conversation, but she thought that the miller talked like a book, because he uttered several sentences together without hesitation or stammering. Rose did not appear to listen, but she lost not a word, and involuntarily her eyes were fixed on those of Grand-Louis. There was a fifth Bricolin, to whom Marcelle paid little attention. This was the old father Bricolin, dressed, like his wife, in peasant costume, who ate much, said nothing, and did not seem to think much more. He was almost deaf, almost blind, and seemed entirely idiotic. His old wife had led him to table like a child. She was very busy about him, filled his plate and his cup, took away the crumb of his bread, because he had lost all his teeth, and his hard and insensible gums could crunch only the hardest crusts, but never spoke to him, as if that had been lost pains. Nevertheless, when he sat down she made him understand that he must take off his hat, out of respect to Mme. de Blanchemont. He obeyed, but without appearing to know why, and resumed it immediately; a liberty which M. Bricolin, his son, after the country fashion, also permitted himself. The miller had not abstained from this custom in the morning at the mill; but now he slyly thrust his cap into his pocket, divided between a new instinct of deference that Marcelle had inspired in him towards women, and the fear of seeming to play the puppy for the first time in his life.

Meanwhile, though admiring what he called the fine learning of the tall miller, M. Bricolin soon found himself of a different opinion in everything. In agriculture, he conceived that there was nothing new to try, that philosophers had never made any discoveries, and that innovation always led to ruin; that ever since the world was, up to *these days of ours*, people had always done the same, and never would do better.

"Good!" said the miller; "nevertheless, the first who did what we do now, they who yoked cattle to open the earth and sow the seed, they did something new, and could they have been stopped by persuading them that land which had never been tilled could never become fertile? It is so in politics; now say, M. Bricolin, if you had been told a hundred years ago that you should pay no more tithes nor due-moneys, that the convents should be destroyed —"

"Bah! bah! I might not have believed it; very true, but that happened because it was to happen. All is for the best in *these days of ours*. Everybody is free to make his fortune, and nothing will ever be invented better than that."

"And the poor, the lazy, the weak, the stupid, what do you make of them?"

"I make nothing of them, for they are good for nothing. The worse for them!"

"And if you were one of them, M. Bricolin, which God forbid! (you are very far from it,) would you say, 'the worse for me'? No, no, you were not saying what you thought when you said, 'the worse for them!' You have too much heart and too much religion for that."

"I! Religion? I laugh at religion, and so dost thou. I can see it is trying to come back, but I am not in the least concerned. Our curate is a good fellow, and I do not interfere with him. If he were a bigot, I should soon give him his walking ticket. Who believes in all such stuff in *these days of ours?*"

"And your wife, and your mother, and your daughter, do they call it stuff?"

"Oh, it pleases them and amuses them. Women seem to need it."

"And we peasants, too, we are like women, we need a religion."

"Well! you have one to your hand; go to mass—I do not hinder you, if you do not force me to go."

"Even that might happen, if the religion that we have should again become fanatic and persecuting, as she has been so much and so often."

"It is good for nothing then? Let it fall. I can do very well without it."

"But since we others must positively have one, must we have another?"

"Another, another! The devil! how thou goest on! Make one thyself!"

"I would have one to keep men from hating, fearing, and injuring one another."

"That would indeed be something new! I should fancy one like that, which would prevent my harvesters from stealing my corn at night, and my day-laborers from taking three hours at noon to eat their soup."

"That would be, if you had a religion which commanded you to make them as happy as yourself."

"Grand-Louis, you have true religion in your heart," said Marcelle.

"He has indeed!" said Rose, warmly.

M. Bricolin dared not reply. He was determined to gain Mme. de Blanchemont's confidence, and not to give her a bad opinion of him. Grand-Louis, who saw Rose's sudden impulse, glanced a look of burning gratitude at Marcelle.

The sun was low, and the plentiful dinner drew towards an end. M. Bricolin, leaning heavily in his chair, thanks to an ample meal and copious draughts, was disposed to betake himself to his favorite pleasure, of drinking coffee "laced" with brandy, and varied by liqueurs, during two or three hours of the evening. But Grand-Louis, upon whom he reckoned for company, left the table, and went to prepare for departure. Mme. de Blanchemont went also to receive the adieux of her servants, and pay them their wages. She gave Lapierre her letter to her mother-in-law, and, taking the miller aside, she intrusted him with that addressed to Henri, requesting him to take it himself to the post.

"Make yourself easy," said he, comprehending that here was some mystery. "It shall not leave my hand till it falls into the box, and no one shall see it, not even your servants, I suppose?"

"Thanks, my kind Louis."

"Thanks! You say thanks to me? Me, who ought to say it on my knees to you? No; you do not know what I owe you! I am going by our house, and in two hours our little Fanchon shall be with you. She is neater and gentler than that great Chounette here."

When Louis and Lapierre were gone, Marcelle felt for an instant mentally distressed at finding herself alone, at the mercy of the Bricolin family. It made her melancholy; and, taking Edward by the hand, she slipped out and gained a little wood which she saw on the opposite side of the meadow. It was still day, and the sun sinking behind the old chateau, threw far along the gigantic shadows of its tall towers. She had not gone far before she was joined by Rose, who felt drawn towards her, and whose sweet face was the only agreeable object that her eyes could have met at this moment.

"I should like to show you the warren," said the damsel; "it is my favorite spot, and I am sure you will like it."

"Whatever it be, I shall think it pleasant in your company," replied Marcelle, passing her arm familiarly through Rose's.

The ancient manorial park of Blanchemont, destroyed in the time of the revolution, was thenceforth enclosed by a deep ditch filled with running water, and by tall quickset hedges, where Rose left a piece of the trimming of her muslin dress, with the haste and indifference of a girl whose wardrobe is well filled. The venerable stumps of the old oaks were covered with young shoots, and the warren had become only a close coppice, in which the axe had spared some ancient lords of the soil, who now seemed like dignified ancestors extending their robust and gnarled arms over a fresh and numerous posterity. Pleasant paths went up and down over the natural irregularities of the soil, and wound under the close, low foliage. It was a mysterious wood, where one might wander freely, leaning on a lover's arm. Marcelle drove away this thought from her beating heart, and fell into a revery as she listened to the songs of the nightingales, linnets, and thrushes who peopled the deserted and quiet grove.

The only avenue not overgrown by the coppice was at the farther edge of the wood, and served as a wagon-road for the farm. Marcelle drew near it with Rose, and her child ran before. Suddenly he paused, and came slowly back, doubtful, serious, and pale.

"What is there?" asked his mother, accustomed to interpret all his impressions, and seeing that he was struggling between fear and curiosity.

"There is an ugly woman down there," answered Edward.

"She may be ugly and good too," returned Marcelle, "Lapierre is very good, but he is not handsome."

"Oh, Lapierre is not ugly!" exclaimed Edward, who, like all children, admired those whom he loved.

"Take my hand," said Marcelle, "and we will go and see this ugly woman."

"No, no, do not go there, it is of no use," said Rose, in a sad and embarrassed manner, but without any sign of fear. "I did not think that *she* was there."

"I wish to accustom Edward to conquer his fears," said Marcelle to her in a low voice.

Rose dared not withstand her, and she went on. But in the midst of the avenue she stopped, struck with a kind of terror at the sight of the singular being who was slowly advancing towards her.

CHAPTER XII.

CASTLES IN THE AIR.

BENEATH the majestic arch formed by the tall oaks on either side of the avenue, which were touched with strong lights and deep shadows by the setting sun, there walked with measured steps a woman, or rather a nameless being, who seemed buried in stern meditation. The face was one of those so denaturalized and brutified by misfortune, as to show neither age nor sex. Still there had been a certain nobleness in the regular features, not entirely destroyed even by the terrible ravages of grief and disease, and the long black hair which streamed dishevelled from under her white cap, over which was set a man's straw hat, torn and broken, gave a sinister cast to the narrow and bronzed physiognomy which it shadowed. Of this face, worn by fever and yellow as saffron, nothing could be seen but two large black glaring eyes, whose preoccupied gaze was seldom met, a straight and well-formed, though somewhat too prominent, nose, and a livid and half-open mouth. Her garments, disgustingly dirty, belonged to the bourgeois class; a poor gown of yellow stuff, half unfastened and trailing on one side, clung around a shapeless form whose high and constantly bent shoulders had acquired a size disproportioned to the rest of the emaciated body. Her lean and swarthy legs were bare, and filthy and ragged shoes ill defended her feet against the flints and thorns, to which she seemed, nevertheless, insensible. She walked slowly, her head bent forward, her eyes fixed on the ground, and her hands busied with twisting and squeezing a bloody handkerchief.

She came straight towards Mme. de Blanchemont, who, concealing her terror that it might not infect Edward, waited with dismay to see whether she would take the right or left, that she might pass her. But the spectre, for this creature resembled an ill-boding apparition, came on, without appearing to notice any one, and, judging by her face, which did not indicate idiocy, but rather leaden despair, she received no impression from external objects. Still, when she reached the shadow which Marcelle cast at her feet, she stopped short, as if she had met an insurmountable obstacle, and suddenly turning her back, resumed her perpetual and monotonous walk.

"It is poor Bricoline," said Rose, without lowering her voice, though she was near enough to hear. "It is my eldest sister, who is crazy. She is not thirty, though she looks like an old woman, and it is twelve years since she has spoken a word to us, or appeared to hear our voices. We do not know whether she is deaf. She is not dumb, for she sometimes speaks when she thinks herself alone, but there is no sense in what she says. She always wishes to be alone, and she is not ill-tempered unless she is crossed. Do not be afraid of her; if you do not seem to see her, she will not even look at you. It is only when we try to make her a little cleaner that she gets angry, and struggles and screams as if we were hurting her."

"Mamma," said Edward, trying to conceal his fear, "take me back to the house; I am hungry."

"How shouldst thou be hungry? thou has just left the table," said Marcelle, who felt as ready as the boy to quit this melancholy spectacle. "Thou art surely mistaken; come into another path; perhaps there is too much sun here, and the heat tires thee."

"Yes, yes, let us go back to the grove," said Rose; "this is a sad sight. There is no risk of her following us, and besides, when she is in an alley, she seldom leaves it; you can see in this how the grass is worn away in the middle, she has walked to and fro so often in the same place. Poor sister! such a pity! She was so handsome and so sweet! I remember when she carried me in her arms and took care of me as you do of this pretty child. But since her misfortune she does not know me, and does not even remember that I exist."

"Ah! my dear Mlle. Rose, this is indeed a terrible misfortune. And what was the cause of it? Was it grief or sickness? Does any one know?"

"Alas! yes, we know well. But we do not speak of it."

"I beg your pardon, if the interest I feel for you has led me to ask an intrusive question."

"Oh! it is another thing with you, madam. You seem to me so kind that one would never feel humiliated before you. So I will tell you, between ourselves, that my poor sister became crazy in consequence of being crossed in love. She loved a young man who was very good and true, but had no money, and our parents would not consent to the marriage. The young man enlisted, and was killed at Algiers. Poor Bricoline was always sad and silent after his departure; they thought that time would cure her vexation and disappointment, but she heard of his death in too cruel a manner. My mother, thinking that if she lost all hope she would recover herself, told her this bad news, suddenly and harshly, at a time when such emotion might have been fatal. My sister did not seem to hear, and answered nothing. It was just supper-time; I remember it as well as if it were yesterday, though I was very young. She let fall her fork, and looked at my mother more than a quarter of an hour without saying a word, without closing her eyes, and in so strange a way that my mother was frightened, and cried: 'Would not one say she was going to eat me?' 'You will come to that pass,' said my grandmother, who is an excellent woman, and would have had Bricoline marry her lover; 'you will torment her so that you will make her crazy.' My grandmother judged but too well. My sister was crazy, and from that day she has never eaten with us. She touches nothing that is given her, and lives always by herself, avoiding us all, and subsisting on old scraps that she picks up in the kitchen when no one is by. Sometimes she throws herself upon a fowl, kills it, tears it with her fingers, and devours it all bloody. I am sure that is what she has just done, for there is blood upon her hands and kerchief. At other times, she pulls vegetables in the garden and eats them raw. In short, she lives like a savage, and frightens everybody. This is what comes from being crossed in love; and my poor parents are heavily punished for misunderstanding their daughter's heart. Yet they never say what they would do if it were to be done again."

Marcelle thought that Rose alluded to herself; and wishing to know how far she returned Grand-Louis's love, she encouraged her confidence by a gentle and affectionate manner. They had reached the opposite border of the warren, farthest from the madwoman's walk; Marcelle felt more easy, and little Edward had already forgotten his fear, and resumed his frolic race around his mother.

"Your mother does seem to me rather strict," said Mme. de Blanchemont to her companion; "but M. Bricolin looks as if he were more indulgent to you."

Rose shook her head. "Papa makes less noise about it than mamma," she said. "He is more lively and caressing; he makes more presents, pays more amiable attentions, and indeed he loves his children dearly, the good father! But in what concerns fortune, and what he calls suitability, his will is perhaps more immovable than my mother's. I have heard him say a hundred times that one were better dead than poor, and that he would kill me rather than consent — "

"To marry you according to your choice?" said Marcelle, seeing that Rose was unable to express herself.

"Oh! that was not what he said," returned Rose, with a little prudish air. "I have never thought of marriage, and I do not yet know but that my choice would be his. But, in short, he is very ambitious for me, and torments himself already with the fear of finding no son-in-law worthy of him. For this reason I shall not be married so soon, and I am glad of it, for I have no desire to leave my home, notwithstanding the little vexations I have from mamma."

Marcelle thought Rose not quite honest in this last declaration; but not wishing to force her confidence, she observed that Rose herself was doubtless very ambitious.

"Oh! not at all!" answered Rose, openly. "I have more money than I need or care for; and though my father says that as we are five children (for I have two sisters and a brother married), each one's share will not be so very large, it is all the same to me. My tastes are simple, and I see plainly that, as things go on, the richer people are so much the poorer also."

"How so?"

"At least it is true of us farmers. You of the nobility make splendid use of your fortunes: you are even accused, among us, of extravagance; and when we see so many old families ruined, we say that we will be wiser, and carefully — what shall I say? — passionately set about founding a race on wealth. One should always double and triple all that one holds; at least, this is what my father, my mother, my sisters and their husbands, my aunts and my cousins, have repeated to me in every key ever since I was born. And so, not to delay in growing rich, they endure all sorts of privations. Now and then a show of expense is made before others; but in the private housekeeping they would, as the saying is, shave an egg. They are afraid of spoiling their furniture, their clothes, and of making themselves too comfortable. At least, this is my mother's system, and it is rather hard to save all one's life, and deprive one's self of all pleasure when one is quite able to command it. And when it is necessary to economize in the comfort, pay, and appetite of others, and to be hard upon workpeople, it becomes very sad. As to me, if I were my own mistress I would refuse nothing to myself nor to anybody else. I would live up to my income, and perhaps the capital would be none the worse for it; for people would love me, and work for me with zeal and fidelity. Was not that what Grand-Louis said at dinner? He was right."

"My dear Rose, he was right in theory."

"In theory?"

"I mean that his generous ideas apply to a state of society which does not yet exist, although sure to come in time. As to actual practice, I mean as to what can be realized now, you are much mistaken if you think that a few good people, in the midst of so many who are bad, could expect to be understood, loved, or rewarded in this life."

"I am astonished at what you say. I thought that you would agree with me. Then you think it right to crush those who labor for our advantage?"

"I do not agree with you, Rose, and yet I am very far from thinking as you suppose. I would have no one compelled to labor for another, but that each should work for all, and in this way for God and for himself at once."

"And how could that be done?"

"The explanation would be too long, my child, and I fear I should give but a poor one. Meanwhile, till the future of my imagination become a reality, I regard it as a great misfortune to be rich, and for my part am very happy to be so no longer."

"That is odd," said Rose; "those who are rich can nevertheless do great good to those who are not, and that is the greatest happiness!"

"One well-intentioned person can do but little good, even in giving away his all, and then he would be utterly powerless!"

"But if everybody did the same?"

"Yes, everybody! That is what is needed; but it is impossible now to induce all rich people to make such a sacrifice. Even you, Rose, would not like to make it completely. You would like to use your income in relieving as much suffering as possible, that is, in raising a few families above want; but you would retain your capital, and I, who preach to you — I hold to the wreck of my fortune to save what is called the *honor* of my son. That is, I must preserve enough for him to meet his father's debts without himself falling into absolute destitution, which would involve lack of education, excessive labor, and probably death for a delicate boy, born of an indolent race, and heir to a feeble organization, which is in this respect far inferior to that of the peasant. Thus you see that, with all our good intentions, we who know not what remedy society can bring to this condition of things, we can do nothing, unless it be to prefer for ourselves mediocrity to riches, and work to idleness. This is one step toward virtue; but how small is our merit in it, and what inefficient help does it present for the abounding misery which meets our eyes and saddens our hearts!"

"But the remedy?" said Rose, quite stupefied. "Is there no remedy? The king ought to find it in his head, since a king can do everything."

"A king can do nothing, or almost nothing," replied Marcelle, smiling at Rose's simplicity. "The people must find it in their hearts."

"All this seems to me like a dream," said the good Rose. "It is the first time that I have heard these things talked of. I think of them, indeed, sometimes all by myself, but at home no one ever says that the world does not go on well. They say that one should take care of one's self, because one's own happiness is the only thing that nobody else will take care of, and that everybody is each one's great enemy; that is fearful, is it not?"

"And there is a strange contradiction in it. The world goes very ill, because it is filled only with creatures full of mutual fear and distrust."

"But what is your thought for escape? For one does not perceive the wrong without having the idea of something better."

"This idea may be clear when all the world has conceived it with you, and assists you in producing it. But when there are only a few against all, and one is mocked at for thinking of it, and it is made a crime to speak of it, the sight is troubled and uncertain. This is the case, I do not say with the greatest spirits of our time — I know nothing of them, I am but an ignorant woman — but with the best meaning hearts, and that is our present position."

"Yes, in *these days of ours*, as papa says," said Rose, smiling. Then, with a sad expression, she added: "What, then, can I do? What shall I do to be good, being rich?"

"You will keep as a treasure in your heart, my dear

Rose, sympathy with suffering, that love of one's neighbor which the Gospel teaches, and the ardent desire to sacrifice yourself for the good of others, in the day when this individual sacrifice may be useful to all."

"That day will come, then?"

"Do not doubt it."

"You are sure of it?"

"As of the justice and the goodness of God."

"It is true, indeed, God cannot let evil last forever. It is all the same, my lady baroness; you have dazzled my brain, and my head aches; but still it seems to me that I understand now why you lost your fortune so calmly, and there are moments in which I imagine that I could myself accept a mere competence with pleasure."

"And what if you must become poor — suffer, labor?"

"Saints! if it were of no use it would be dreadful!"

"And if one began the while to see that it was of some use? If it were necessary to pass through a crisis of great agony, a sort of martyrdom, that humanity might be saved?"

"Well, then," said Rose, looking amazedly at Marcelle, "one would endure it patiently."

"One would rush into it with enthusiasm!" cried Marcelle, with a look and tone which startled Rose, but electrified her with sympathy, though to her own extreme surprise.

Edward began to slacken his sport, and the moon rose. Marcelle thought it time to put the child to bed, and Rose followed her in silence, still all confounded by the conversation they had held together. But falling back upon the realities of life as she drew near the farm, and heard from afar her mother's resounding voice, she said to herself, looking at the young châtelaine walking before her:

"Can she, too, be crazy?"

CHAPTER XIII.

ROSE.

NOTWITHSTANDING this apprehension, Rose felt irresistibly drawn to Marcelle. She helped her to undress her child, surrounded her with a thousand charming attentions, and when about to leave her, took her hand to kiss. Marcelle, who already loved her as a child of sweet natural endowments, prevented her, by kissing both her cheeks. Encouraged and delighted, Rose lingered.

"I should like to ask you one thing," said she at last. "Has Grand-Louis really enough mind to comprehend you?"

"Certainly, Rose! But what is that to you?" answered Marcelle, with a spice of mischief.

"Only it seemed very strange to me to-day to see that of us all, it was our miller who had most thoughts. And yet he has had no great instruction, poor Louis!"

"But he has so much heart and sense!" said Marcelle.

"Oh, indeed he has heart! I know him very well. I was brought up with him. His elder sister was my foster-mother, and my first years were passed at the mill of Angibault. Did not he tell you about it?"

"He did not speak of you to me, but I thought I perceived that he was much devoted to you."

"He has always been very good to me," said Rose, blushing. "His love of children is a proof of his excellence. He was not more than seven or eight when I was at nurse with his sister, and my grandmother says that he tended me and amused me as if he had been old enough for my father. It seems, too, that I was so fond of him that I would not leave him; and my mother, who did not dislike him then as she does now, brought him home with me for company, when I was weaned. He staid here two or three years, instead of the two or three months proposed at first. He was so active and serviceable that he was very useful to us. His mother was then poorly off, and my grandmother, who is her friend, thought it a good plan to relieve her from one of her children. I remember well the time when Louis, my poor sister, and I were always running and playing together in the field, or the warren, or the barns. But when he was old enough to be of use to his mother in the mill, she sent for him. We were so sorry to part, and I fretted so without him, and his mother and sister (my foster-mother) were so fond of me, that they took me to Angibault every Saturday evening to stay till Monday morning. This lasted till I was old enough to be sent to boarding-school; and when I came out, of course a young man like the miller, and a girl who was considered a young lady, could no longer be playmates together. Still we often see each other, especially since my father employs him as his miller, notwithstanding the distance, and he comes here three or four times a week. And then I always take great pleasure in making a visit to Angibault, and his mother, whom I love dearly. Well, madam, can you conceive that for some time my mother has an idea that this is not well, and prevents my going there? She has taken the greatest dislike to poor Louis, she does all she can to mortify him, and has forbidden me to dance with him at the assemblies, on pretence that he is beneath me. But all of us young ladies in the country, we always dance with the peasants who invite us; and besides, it cannot be said that the Miller of Angibault is a peasant. He has about 20,000 francs, and has been better brought up than many others. To tell you the truth, my cousin Honoré Bricolin does not write and spell as well as he, though much more money has been spent on his education, and I cannot see why they would have me so proud of my family."

"I cannot understand either," said Marcelle, who saw that a little art was necessary with Mlle. Rose, and that she would not confess herself with the ardent freedom of Grand-Louis. "Do you see nothing in the good miller's manners that may have caused your mother's displeasure?"

"Oh! nothing at all. He is a thousand times more polite and well-behaved than any of our country bourgeois, who almost all drink too much, and are sometimes very coarse. He never said a word in my ear that could make me cast down my eyes."

"But might not your mother have taken up the singular idea that he was, perhaps, in love with you?"

Rose was confused, hesitated, and ended by avowing that her mother might easily have persuaded herself of that.

"And if your mother had guessed truly, would not she be right to put you on your guard against him?"

"Why, that is as it may be! If it were so, and if he spoke to me! But he never said a word to me beyond friendship."

"And if he were deeply enamoured of you without daring to tell you so?"

"Then where would be the harm?" said Rose, coquettishly.

"You would be very wrong to keep his passion alive without wishing to encourage it seriously," answered Marcelle, in quite a severe tone. "It would be playing with a friend's suffering; and it is not in your family, Rose, that a disappointment in love should be treated lightly!"

"Oh!" said Rose with a roguish look, "men do not go crazy for such things! Still," added she, artlessly, and hanging her head, "I must own that poor Louis is sometimes very sad, and talks like a man in despair — and I am sure I cannot guess why! It makes me very sorry."

"Not enough so, however, to make you condescend to understand him?"

"But if he did love me, what could I do to comfort him?"

"To be sure! you must love him, or avoid him."

"I can do neither. It is as good as impossible to love him, and as to avoiding him, I feel too much friendship for him to resolve on giving him such pain. If you knew how he looks when I pretend not to notice him! He turns quite white, and that hurts me."

"Then why do you say that it would be impossible for you to love him?"

"Saints! can one love one whom they cannot marry?"

"But one can always marry the one whom they love."

"Oh, not always! Look at my poor sister. Her example is too fearful for me to take the risk of following it."

"You risk nothing, my dear Rose," said Marcelle, with some bitterness; "when it is so easy to dispose of one's love and one's will, there is no love, and no danger."

"Do not say so," returned Rose with vivacity. "I am as capable as another of loving, and risking misfortune. But would you advise me to be so courageous?"

"God forbid! I would only help you to determine the state of your heart, that you may not, by your imprudence, cause unhappiness to Louis."

"Poor Grand-Louis! — But see, madam, what can I do? Suppose that my father, after trying anger and threats, consented to give me to him; that my mother, terrified by my sister's fate, should prefer to sacrifice her repugnance rather than see me fall sick, all of which is by no means likely; — but to reach this point, what quarrels, and scenes, and vexation would there not be?"

"You are afraid—you do not love, I tell you; you may be right, and for this reason it is necessary that Grand-Louis should go."

This advice, to which Marcelle always returned, seemed not at all to Rose's taste. Her vanity was extremely flattered by the miller's love, especially since Mme. de Blanchemont had so raised him in her estimation, and somewhat, perhaps, from the rarity of the case. The peasants have little susceptibility to passion, and in the bourgeois society in which Rose lived, strong feeling is more and more uncommon and unknown, among the crowding cares of worldly interest. Rose had read romances; she was proud of inspiring an extravagant and hopeless attachment, of which, perhaps, the whole country side would one day talk with amazement. Finally, Grand-Louis was the favorite of all the peasant girls, and there was not sufficient distinction between their class, and the parvenu *bourgeoisie* of the Bricolins, to make this an unimportant conquest over the prettiest girls of the place.

"Do not think me cowardly," said Rose, after an instant's reflection. "I am quite able to reply to mamma when she accuses the poor fellow unjustly, and if I should take a fancy into my head — with help of you who are so wise, and whom my father is so anxious, just now, to please — I might triumph over everything. But in the first place, I assure you that I should not lose my senses, like my poor sister. I am obstinate, and have been so much spoiled that they are a little afraid of me. But I will tell you what I should find hardest."

"Go on, Rose, I am listening."

"What will people think of me, if I make this turmoil at home! All my young friends will cast scorn upon me, partly through jealousy of the love I inspire, such as they will never find in their moneyed marriages! I shall be pursued with blame and mockery by all my cousins and suitors, who think themselves so grand, and will be furious at my preferring a peasant to them; by all the mothers, frightened at my example for their daughters; and by even the peasants, envious of one of themselves for making what they call a great marriage. 'There's a crazy girl,' one will say; 'it is in the blood, and she will soon eat raw meat like her sister.' 'What a fool,' another will say, 'when she might marry a man of her own class!' 'She is a wicked girl,' everybody will cry, 'to grieve the parents who never refused her anything. Oh! the shameless, abandoned thing, to make all this scandal about a laborer because he is five feet eight! Why not for her ploughboy? Why not for Uncle Cadoche, who begs from door to door?' There will never be an end of all this, and I think it is not well for a young girl to expose herself to such things for love of a man."

"My dear Rose," said Marcelle, "your last objections do not appear to me so serious as your first, and yet I see that you shrink more from braving public opinion than the resistance of your parents. We must carefully examine the *pros* and *cons* together, and as you have related your history to me, I owe you mine. I will tell it to you, though it is a secret — my life secret! The time will come when it will be none, and meanwhile I am sure you will keep it faithfully."

"Oh, madam!" cried Rose, throwing herself on Marcelle's neck, "how good you are! I have never known any secrets, and I have always longed to have one to keep. Judge whether yours will be sacred to me! It will explain many things to me, for it seems to me that there must be a principle in love as in all things, and no one would ever speak to me of it, under pretence that there was not, or ought not to be, any such thing as love. Still it seems to me — but speak, speak, dear Mme. Marcelle! I imagine that possessing your confidence, I shall have your friendship."

"Why not, if I may hope to have yours in answer?" said Marcelle, returning her caresses.

"Oh, heavens!" said Rose, her eyes full of tears; "do you not see that I love you? that from the first glance my heart leaned toward you, and is all yours, though it is but a day that I know you? How can it be? I know nothing of it. But I never saw any one who pleased me as much as you. I have seen such women only in books, and I feel towards you as if you alone were all the beautiful novel heroines of whom I have read."

"Then too, dear child, your noble heart needs to love! I will try not to be unworthy of the occasion which favors me."

The small Fanchon was already installed in the neighboring closet, and already breathed loud enough to cover the voices of the owls, and the wailing of the wind around the old turrets. Marcelle seated herself at the open window, and while the quiet stars shone down from a sky of glorious purity, she took Rose's hand in hers, and spoke as follows: —

CHAPTER XIV.

MARCELLE.

MY story, dear Rose, is indeed like a romance; but it is so simple, and has so little novelty, that it is like all other romances. You shall have it in as few words as possible.

"When my boy was two years old, his health was so poor that I despaired of his life. My anxiety, my depression, and the constant care which I would intrust to no one beside, were natural reasons for my retirement from society, of which I had seen but little, and that little without pleasure. The physicians advised me to take my child to the country. My husband had a fine estate twenty leagues from here, as you know; but the noisy and profligate life he led there with his friends, his horses, his dogs, and his mistresses, deterred me from trying the place, even at the times when he was in Paris. My old Lapierre, who had passed some time there, gave me such a picture of the disorder of the house, the insolence of the servants, whose unpaid wages gave them the privilege of unrebuked pillage, and the disagreeable neighborhood, that I gave up the thought of living there. M. de Blanchemont, who did not care to have me come here, lest I should become acquainted with his irregularities, assured me that this was a horrible place, and that the old chateau was uninhabitable; and on this last point you will allow that little exaggeration was necessary. He talked of buying me a country house near Paris; but where could he have found money for the purchase, when at that very time, without my knowing it, he was nearly ruined?

"Seeing that his promises came to nothing, and that my boy was failing, I hastily hired half a house, the first and the only one I could find at the moment, at Montmorency, a village admirably situated near Paris, with a very healthy neighborhood of woods and hills. Houses there are in much request by Parisians, and even rich people go and live there in the simplest manner, for part of the summer.

"My relations and friends came to see me often at first, then less and less, as always happens when the person visited really loves her retreat, and attracts others to it neither by luxury nor coquetry. Towards the close of the first season, a fortnight often passed without my seeing any one from Paris. I had no acquaintance with the notabilities of the place. Edward was better; I was calm and satisfied: I read much, I walked in the woods alone with him, a woman to lead his ass, a book, and a great dog, the jealous guardian of our persons. This life pleased me exceedingly, and M. de Blanchemont was delighted to be free from the care of me. He never came to see me. Now and then he sent a servant to inquire after his son's health, and my pecuniary wants, which, happily for me, were very modest; he could not otherwise have satisfied them."

"See now!" cried Rose; "he told us here that it was for you he exceeded his income and yours — that you must have horses and carriages, while you perhaps were on foot in the woods, to save hiring an ass!"

"You have guessed right, dear Rose. When I asked my husband for money, he told me such long, strange stories about the poverty of his tenants, and how they were ruined by the winter's frost, and the summer's hail, that, weary of all these details, and frequently duped by his generous commiseration for you, I approved it, and waived my claim to the enjoyment of my income.

"The old house in which I lived was neat, but very humble, and I attracted no attention there. I occupied the upper of its two stories. Two young men, of whom one was sick, lived in the lower. A little shady garden, surrounded by a high wall, where Edward used to play with his nurse, while I sat at the window, was common to both the lodgers, M. Henri Lemor and me.

"Henri was 22. His brother was not more than 15. The poor boy was consumptive, and his brother nursed him with the tenderest care. They were orphans. Henri was a real mother to the poor sufferer. He did not leave him for an hour; he read to him, carried him in his arms to take the air, dressed and undressed him like a child, and, as the unfortunate Ernest scarcely slept, Henri, pale, exhausted, and haggard with watching, looked almost as ill as he.

"An excellent old woman who owned our house, and lived in part of the basement, showed great kindness and devotion to these unhappy young people; but she could not do everything, and I was eager to second her. I did so, zealously and without sparing myself, as you would have done in my place, Rose; and even in the last days of Ernest's life, I scarcely quitted his bedside. He testified boundless affection and gratitude to me. Not knowing and no longer feeling the serious nature of his disease, he died without knowing it, and almost while speaking. He had just said to me that I had cured him, when his breathing ceased, and his hand stiffened and grew cold in mine.

"Henri's grief was so deep as to make him sick, and it became his turn to be nursed and watched. The strength of the old landlady, Mme. Joly, failed; Edward was fortunately very well, and I could divide my care between him and Henri. The duty of assisting and comforting the latter fell to me alone, and, by the end of the autumn, I had the joy of seeing him restored to life.

"You can easily imagine, Rose, the deep, unalterable friendship that was cemented between us two, amid so much grief and danger. When winter and the urgency of my relations forced me to return to Paris, we had formed such delightful habits of reading, talking, and walking together in the little garden, that our separation was truly heart-rending. But we ventured to promise to meet at Montmorency the following year. We were still timid with one another, and would have trembled at giving the name of love to our mutual affection.

"Henri had never thought of inquiring into my position, nor I into his. Our expenses were about the same. He asked permission to come and see me in Paris; but when I gave him my address at my mother-in-law's, at the Hotel de Blanchemont, he appeared surprised and alarmed. When I left Montmorency in the carriage with armorial bearings which my relations sent for me, he seemed dismayed, and when he learned that I was rich (I thought I was, and passed for such) he looked upon himself as forever separated from me. The winter passed without my seeing him, or hearing his name.

"Yet at this time Lemor was really richer than I. His father, who had died the year previous, was a man of the people, — a workman brought into easy circumstances by a small trade and much ability. His children had received a very good education, and Ernest's death left Henri with an income of eight or ten thousand francs. But the coarse and money-making character of the tradesman father, his shocking hardness and deep-seated selfishness, had early revolted Henri's enthusiastic and generous spirit. The winter after Ernest's death, he eagerly ceded his stock-in-trade, for a nominal price, to a man whom the elder Lemor had ruined by taking advantage of circumstances in the most rapacious and ungenerous manner. Henri distributed the proceeds of this sale among the workmen whom his father had long oppressed, and withdrawing from their gratitude with a sort of aversion (for he has often told me that these unfortunate men had been themselves corrupted and degraded by their master's example), he changed his abode, and chose an apprenticeship to become himself an artisan. The preceding year, and before his brother's illness drove him to the country, he had commenced the study of mechanics.

"I learned all these details through the old woman at Montmorency, whom I visited two or three times towards the end of the winter, as much, I confess, to hear something of Henri, as on account of the friendship of which she was in every way worthy. This woman venerated

Lemor. She had nursed poor Ernest as if he had been her own son, and she never spoke of Henri but with clasped hands and tearful eyes. When I asked her why he did not come to see me, she answered that my wealth and position in society could not permit natural intercourse between a person like me and one who had voluntarily cast himself into poverty. It was on this occasion that she told me all that she knew of him, and which I have just related to you.

"You can understand, dear Rose, how I was struck by the conduct of this young man, who in our intercourse had shown himself so simple, modest, and entirely ignorant of his moral greatness. I could think of nothing else. In company, or in my solitary chamber, at the theatre, or at church, his remembrance and his image were always in my heart and my thoughts. I compared him with all the men whom I knew, and how noble he appeared to me!

"By the end of March I returned to Montmorency, not hoping to find my interesting neighbor there. Yet when I entered the garden with one of my aunts, who had insisted on seeing me reëstablished in the country, I had one moment of real grief, on hearing that the lower story was let to an old lady. But when my companion was at a little distance, good Mme. Joly whispered me that she had told this little lie because my aunt seemed inquisitive and gossiping, but that Lemor was there, and now concealed, not to see me till I was alone.

"I thought I should faint with joy, and was ready to die with my patient endurance of the civilities and attentions of my poor aunt. At last she went, and I again saw Lemor; and not that day alone, but every day, and almost every hour of the day, from the end of winter till the last of autumn. The few and short visits that were paid me, and my necessary journeys to Paris, stole from us at most, putting all the hours together, two weeks of our delightful intimacy.

"I leave you to judge whether this life was happy, and whether love became absolute master of our friendship. But our feeling was as pure in the sight of God and of my son, as had been the friendship formed at the death-bed of Henri's brother. There was, perhaps, a little gossip about it among the natives of Montmorency, but the good reputation of our hostess, her discretion with regard to the feeling she could not but guess, her warmth in defending our conduct, the quiet, retired life which we led, and our care never to appear together out of the house,—in short, the absence of any ground for scandal silenced calumny, and no word ever reached the ears of my husband or any of my relatives.

"Never was love more religiously felt — never did it fill two souls with a more healthful influence. My mind was transported into a new sphere. Henri's opinions may seem very singular to the world, but to me none beside can be so true, or so Christian. The enthusiasm of faith and virtue became known to me at the same time with that of feeling. These two emotions are henceforth inseparably bound together in my heart. Henri adored my boy, my boy whom his father forgot, deserted, and scarcely knew! And Edward felt the tenderness and respect for Lemor that his father should have inspired.

"Once more the winter tore us from our terrestrial paradise, but this time it did not separate us. Lemor came secretly to see me from time to time, and we exchanged letters almost every day. He had a key to the garden; and, when we were prevented from meeting there by night, a cleft in the pedestal of an old statue received our correspondence.

"You know that M. de Blanchemont lost his life very recently in a tragic and unexpected manner, killed by one of his friends in a mortal duel about a silly mistress who had betrayed him. I saw Henri a month afterwards, and my sorrows date from that moment. I thought it so natural to engage myself to him for life! I wished to see him for one moment, and fix with him the time when the duties of my position would permit me to give him my hand and myself, as he possessed my heart and soul. But would you believe it, Rose? His first impulse was a terrified and despairing refusal! The fear of being rich, yes, the dread of wealth, was more powerful than love, and he fled from me with horror.

"I was offended, dismayed. I knew not how to convince him, and I would not stay him. And then, on reflection, I found that he was right; that he was consistent with himself, and faithful to his principles. I esteemed him for it, I loved him the more, and I resolved so to order my life as no longer to wound him; to quit the world altogether, and bury myself in the country, far from Paris, so as to break off all connection with the rich and powerful, whom Lemor looks upon as alike enemies of humanity, whether their action be wilfully injurious or merely blind and involuntary.

"But with this project, which was only secondary in my mind, I associated another, which should go to the root of the evil, and forever destroy all the scruples of my lover, my future husband. I desired to imitate his example, and consume my fortune in what we called at the convent good works — in what Lemor calls the work of remuneration — in what is just toward men and pleasing to God in all religious creeds, and in all ages. I was free to make this sacrifice without injury to what the rich would call the future prosperity of my son, since I still believed him heir to a considerable fortune; and besides, in my secret thought, by abstaining from the use of his revenue during the long years of his minority, by accumulating and investing his rents, I should labor for his happiness also. That is to say, that by bringing him up in habits of sobriety and simplicity, and communicating to him the fervor of my charity, I should enable him, in time, to consecrate to the same holy use a considerable fortune, augmented by my economy and by my self-imposed determination not to use it in any way for my own benefit, notwithstanding my legal rights in that respect. It seemed to me that the artless and tender soul of my child would respond to my enthusiasm, and that I should heap up these terrestrial riches for his future salvation. Smile if you will, dear Rose, but it still seems to me that I shall succeed, under more restricted conditions, in making my Edward regard things in this way. He has no longer an inheritance from his father, and what is left to me will be henceforth devoted to him for the same end. I think I have no right to despoil myself of the competence that remains to us both, for I conceive that nothing now belongs solely to myself, since he has no certain expectations but from me. The vow of poverty which I would have taken is a new baptism, which, perhaps, God does not permit me to impose upon my child till he is old enough freely to accept or reject it. Ought I, having given birth to a creature destined to enjoyment and power in society, to deprive him forcibly and unconsulted of what society calls a great advantage and a sacred right? In the general greed and selfishness which the corrupting influences of wealth have induced in mankind, if I should die, and leave my son to penury, before I had had time to teach him the love of labor, to what vices and degradation should I not expose his good but feeble instincts? Some men talk of a religion of brotherhood and community, where all men shall be happy through loving, and become rich through stripping themselves of their possessions. It is said that the greatest saints of Christianity, and the greatest sages of antiquity, have been upon the point of solving this problem. It is yet farther said that this religion is ready to sink into the hearts of men, though all seems, in the actual world, to conspire against it, because the immense and terrific strife of selfish interest must give rise to the necessity for a change, through very weariness of wrong, need of truth, and love of good. I believe all this firmly, Rose. But, as I said to you just now, I know not what day God has fixed for the fulfilment of His designs. I understand nothing of politics; I do not see in them sufficiently vivid gleams of my ideal; and, sheltered in the ark like the bird during the deluge, I wait, pray, suffer, and hope, unheeding the scorn which the world lavishes on those who do not approve its injustice, and rejoice in the calamities of their times.

"But in this ignorance of the morrow, in this unchained tempest of opposing human forces, I must strain my boy to my bosom, and aid him to surmount the wave which perhaps is bearing us to the shore of a better world than this. Alas, dear Rose! in an age when money is everything, everything is bought and sold. Art, science, all instruction — and consequently all the virtues — and religion itself, is forbidden to those who cannot pay for the advantage of drinking from these divine sources. Just as one pays for the sacraments of the church, must one buy with money the right to be a man, to learn to read and to think, to know good and evil. The poor are condemned, save those of remarkable genius, to vegetate, deprived of wisdom and instruction; and the beggar, the poor child, whose only trade is to stretch out the hand and utter plaintive sounds, amid what false and obscure notions is his weak and untrained intelligence obliged to struggle! There is something terrible in the thought that superstition is the only religion accessible to the peasant; that his whole worship is reduced to forms, of which he knows neither the meaning nor the origin, and that God is to him only an idol favorable to the harvests and flocks of those who vow to him an image or a candle. While coming here this morning, I met a procession stopping around a fountain, to conjure the drought. I asked why they prayed here rather than elsewhere. A woman replied to me, showing a little plaster statue set in a niche, and decked with garlands like a pagan deity,* 'Because this good lady is the best of all for rain.'

"If my son is poor, he must thus be idolatrous, unlike the early Christians, who embraced the true religion with holy poverty. I well know that the poor man may rightfully demand of me, 'Why should thy son know God and truth rather than mine?' Alas! I have no reply, but that I can save his son only by the sacrifice of mine. And what a cruel answer! Oh! the hour of shipwreck is fearful. Each one flies to save what is dear-est to him, and abandons the rest. But yet again, Rose, what can we poor women do, who know enough only to weep over all this?

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* The Fathers of the primitive Church bitterly condemned this pagan custom of ornamenting the statues of the gods. Minutius Felix speaks admirably and clearly on this point. The Church of the Middle Ages reëstablished the practices of idolatry, and the modern Church continues this lucrative speculation.

"Thus the duties imposed on us by family ties and by humanity are contradictory; but something we can do for the family, while for humanity, unless we are very rich, we can do nothing. For in these times, when small fortunes are so rapidly swallowed up by those greater, mediocrity is constraint and feebleness.

"This is why," continued Marcelle, wiping away a tear, "I am forced to modify the fair visions I had on quitting Paris two days ago. But I still mean to do my best, Rose, not to surround myself with little useless pleasures at others' expense. I wish to bring myself to what is merely necessary, buy a peasant house, live as cheaply as is possible without injuring my health (since I owe my life to Edward), arrange my small capital so as one day to give it to him, after having indicated to him whatever pious and useful employment of it God may have revealed to us in that time; and meanwhile, devote the least possible portion of my humble revenue to our needs and the good education of my son, that I may always have wherewith to assist the poor who may knock at my door. This, I believe, is all I can do, unless there should soon be formed a truly holy association, a sort of new church, where some inspired believers should summon their brethren to live in common under the laws of a religion and a morality answering to the noble claims of the soul, and to the laws of true equality. Do not ask me what these laws would precisely be. I have no mission to state them, since God has not given me the genius to discover them. My intelligence is limited to the power of understanding them when revealed, and my good instincts compel me to reject the systems now offered somewhat too arrogantly under various names. I see none of them in which moral liberty is respected, or where atheism or ambition do not appear more or less. You have perhaps heard of the St. Simonians and the Fourierites. Even these systems are without religion and without love, abortive philosophies, rough sketches, where the spirit of evil seems to hide under the guise of philanthropy. I do not absolutely condemn them, but they repel me with the presentiment of a new snare laid for the simplicity of mankind.

"But it is late, my good Rose, and your beautiful bright eyes are nevertheless striving against the fatigue of listening to me. I have no inference to draw for you from all this, save that we are both loved by poor men, and that one of us aspires to free herself from the alliance of the rich, while the other hesitates and dreads their opinion."

"Ah, madam!" said Rose, who had heard Marcelle with religious attention, "how great and good you are! how well you know how to love, and how plainly I now understand why I love you! It seems to me that your story, and the explanation of your conduct, have made my brain as large again. What a poor, sad, mean life do we lead compared with that of which you dream! My God! my God! I think I shall die the day that you go from here!"

"I confess, dear Rose, that but for you I should be impatient to go and build my cabin among those of the poorest people; but you will make me love your farm, and even this old chateau — Ah! I hear your mother calling you. Kiss me again, and forgive me for having spoken some harsh words to you. I reproach myself, now that I see how sensitive and affectionate you are."

Rose embraced the young baroness with eager warmth, and left her. Like a spoiled child as she was, she gave herself the small pleasure of letting her mother call while she went slowly towards her. Then she reproached herself, and began to run; but she could not bring herself to answer till she was quite there; that shrill voice sounded in her ear like a false note in music, after the sweet harmony of Marcelle's words.

Still weary from her journey, Mme. de Blanchemont slipped into the bed where her child was sleeping, and drawing the orange-colored curtains of flowered linen, she was falling asleep without thinking of the indispensable ghosts of the old chateau, when an incomprehensible noise compelled her to listen, and startled her into half rising.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RENCONTRE.

THE noise which broke our heroine's repose was that of something moving to and fro over the outside of her chamber door, with singular persistence and awkwardness. The touch was too clumsy and unintelligent to be that of a human hand feeling for the lock in the dark, and yet, as the sound was not like that made by a rat, Marcelle could form no other supposition. She thought that some one belonging to the farm might sleep in the old chateau, perhaps some drunken servant, who, groping for his lodging, had mistaken the story. Then, remembering that she had not taken in the key, she rose to repair her forgetfulness as soon as the person should go. But the noise continued, and Marcelle dared not open the door to effect her design, for fear of encountering some clownish insult. This little anxiety was beginning to be very disagreeable, when the doubtful hand grew impatient, and scratched the door in such a way that Marcelle was sure it was a cat; and, smiling at her alarm, put her hand on the latch, to receive or drive away this visitor to her chamber. But scarcely had she opened a crack, with some remaining caution, when the door was flung back upon her with violence, and the madwoman stood upon the threshold before her eyes.

This visit appeared to Marcelle more unpleasant than any she could have supposed, and she doubted whether she should not repulse the disturber by force, notwithstanding what she had been told of the habitually quiet nature of her insanity. But the disgust which she felt at the shocking uncleanliness of the unfortunate creature, and yet more a feeling of compassion, prevented her from carrying this idea into execution. The maniac did not seem conscious of her presence, and it was probable that, with her taste for solitude, she would retreat as soon as Marcelle should attract her attention. Mme. de Blanchemont thought it best to wait and observe the caprice of her vexatious guest; and drawing back, she seated herself on the edge of her bed, closing the curtains behind her, so that if Edward should wake, he might not see the *ugly woman* who had frightened him in the warren.

Bricoline (we have already mentioned that in all families of the peasantry and country bourgeois, the eldest daughter is called by the hereditary name with a feminine termination) hastily crossed the chamber, and went to the window, which she opened after many futile attempts, for the weakness of her emaciated hands, and the length of her nails — which she would never permit to be cut — made her very awkward. When she had succeeded she leaned out, and with a designedly subdued voice, called *Paul.* This was doubtless the name of her lover, whom she always expected, and in whose death she could not be persuaded to believe.

As this melancholy summons awakened no echo in the silence of the night, she sat down on the stone bench, which, in all antique structures of this kind occupies the deep embrasure of the window, and remained mute, constantly twisting her bloody handkerchief, and apparently resigned to wait. In about ten minutes she rose and called again, still in a low voice, as if she thought her lover concealed in the bushes about the moat, and feared to awaken the attention of some of the people at the farm.

For more than an hour the unhappy girl continued this course, first calling Paul, and then awaiting him with extraordinary patience and resignation. Her ghastly face and deformed figure were fully displayed by the moon. Perhaps she found a sort of happiness in this vain hope. Perhaps the illusion was so strong that she dreamed, while awake, that he was there, and that she heard and answered him. And then, when the dream faded, she recovered it by calling anew upon her dead lover.

Marcelle's heart was wrung as she observed her. She would fain have surprised all the secrets of her madness, in the hope of finding some means to mitigate her suffering; but such insane persons never explain themselves, and it is impossible to divine whether they are absorbed by the ceaseless gnawing of one thought, or whether the action of their minds is occasionally suspended.

When the wretched girl at last left the window, she began to pace the room with the same slow step and gravity of demeanor which had struck Marcelle in the alley of the warren. She appeared no longer to think of her lover, and her strongly contracted countenance resembled that of an old alchemist lost in the pursuit of the grand arcanum. This regular march lasted long enough to be extremely fatiguing to Mme. de Blanchemont, who dared neither go to bed, nor leave her child long enough to call the small Fanchon. At last the lunatic changed her mood, and going up to the next story, went to another window to call Paul and await his coming.

Marcelle then thought she ought to go and tell the Bricolins. Doubtless they were unaware that their daughter had escaped from the house, and perhaps ran the risk of suicide, or of an involuntary fall from a window. But Fanchon, whom she roused with some difficulty to take her place at Edward's bedside while she went herself to the new chateau, dissuaded her from her intention.

"Eh! no, madam!" said she, "the Bricolins will not stir themselves for that. They are used to seeing this poor young lady run around both night and day. She does no harm, and it is long since she has forgotten to make way with herself. They say she never sleeps. It is no wonder that she is wider awake in the moonlight. Shut your door tight, so that she shall not trouble you again. You did well not to speak to her; it vexes her, and makes her cross. She will go on as usual up there till day, like the owls; but now that you know what it is, it will not keep you from sleeping."

Little Fanchon spoke quite at her ease, and, thanks to her fifteen years and quiet temperament, would have slept close to the roar of cannon, if she but knew what it was. Marcelle found some difficulty in following her example; but finally, overpowered by fatigue, she slept, notwithstanding the continual and regular steps of the maniac, which she heard above her room, shaking the trembling beams of the old chateau.

The next day Rose was sorry, but not surprised, to learn the incident of the night.

"Ah, heavens!" said she, "and yet we shut her up closely, knowing that she is used to wander all around, and prefers the old chateau during the moonlight nights. (That is the reason my mother did not want to lodge you here.) But she must have found some means to open her window, and so get out. She is neither strong nor skilful with her hands, but she has such patience! She has but one idea, and never rests. My lord baron, whose heart was not tender like yours, and who made fun of things that are least to be laughed at, pretended that she sought — now see if I can remember his word — the quadrature,— yes, that is it, the quadrature of the circle; and when he saw her pass, he would say to us, 'Well, has not your philosopher yet solved the problem?'"

"I feel no inclination to jest upon a subject so heartrending," replied Marcelle; "and I had dismal dreams last night. See, Rose, we are good friends, and I hope we shall be so more and more; and since you offered me your chamber, I accept it on condition that you do not leave it, but that we share it. A sofa for Edward, and a cot for me, will be quite enough."

"Oh! you make me perfectly happy," cried Rose, throwing her arms round her neck. "It will not give me the least trouble. There are two beds in all our chambers; it is the country custom, so as to be always ready to receive a friend or relation, and I shall be so happy to talk with you every evening!"

This day, in fact, greatly increased the friendship of the two young women. Marcelle yielded herself to it with the more freedom, that it was the only agreeable thing she could expect while with the Bricolins. The farmer showed her over a part of the estate, talking incessantly of money and arrangements. He tried in vain to disguise his desire to purchase, and Marcelle, who, to bring this tiresome and unpleasant business to an end, was ready to make some of the required sacrifices as soon as she should be assured of the exactitude of his statements, had tact enough, meanwhile, to keep him uneasy. She understood from Rose that she might, just now, have great influence over her destiny; and besides, Grand-Louis had made her promise to decide nothing without consulting him. Mme. de Blanchemont felt entire confidence in this unexpected friend, and determined to await his return to choose a competent adviser. He knew everybody, and had too much judgment not to place her in good hands.

We left the excellent miller starting for the town of * * *, with Lapierre, Suzette, and the patachon. They arrived there by ten o'clock, and the next morning, at dawn, Grand-Louis saw the two servants in the Paris diligence, and took his way to the house of the bourgeois whom he had pitched upon as the purchaser of the carriage. But in passing the post-office, he went in to give to the postmaster himself the letter with which Marcelle had charged him. The first face which met his eyes was that of the young unknown, who, a fortnight before, had been straying through the Black Valley, visiting Blanchemont, and had been led by chance to the mill of Angibault. This young man did not observe him; he was standing near the office door, and reading eagerly, and with emotion, a newly-received letter. Grand-Louis having Mme. de Blanchemont's in his hand, and remembering the interest excited in the young lady by the name of Henri cut upon a tree on the bank of the Vauvre, cast a side glance upon the address of the young man's letter, which it was easy for him to do, as the unknown held it in such a way as to conceal the contents, but completely expose the outside. With a rapid look of friendly curiosity, the miller saw the name of M. Henri Lemor, in the same hand as the address of the letter which he was carrying. Doubtless these two letters were both from Marcelle, and the unknown was — the miller used no ceremony in his supposition — the lover of the beautiful widow.

Grand-Louis was not mistaken; Lemor had that instant received the first note that Marcelle had written from Paris, which the friend who took charge of his letters had sent to the *poste restante* at * * *, and he was far from expecting the happiness of immediately receiving another, when Grand-Louis sportively slipped the treasure between his eyes and that which he was about reading for the third time.

Henri started, and would have snatched the letter; but the miller withdrew it, saying, "No, no, not so fast, my boy! The clerk there may spy us, and I have no fancy for paying the fine, which is not small. We will talk a little farther off, for I have no idea that you will have patience to wait till this pretty letter return from Paris, where it would certainly be sent, spite of your claim and your passport, since it is not addressed to the *poste restante* here. Follow me a little way."

Lemor followed him, but the miller was already disturbed by a new scruple. "Stay," said he, when they had reached a suitably lonely place, "are you really the person whose name is upon this letter?"

"Certainly you have no doubt of it; and you apparently know me, since you presented it to me?"

"Never mind, you have a passport?"

"Surely, for I have just shown it at the office to procure my letters."

"Never mind again, though you take me for a gendarme in disguise, let us see it," said the miller, giving him the letter. "Hand over, hand over."

"You are very suspicious," said Lemor, hastily giving him his papers.

"Yet a little moment," pursued the prudent miller; "I want to be able to swear, if the post-office people did see me give you the letter, that it was unsealed." And he quickly broke the seal, but without permitting himself to open the letter, and returned it to Henri as he took his passport.

While the young man was eagerly reading, the miller, not sorry to have an opportunity of satisfying his curiosity, made acquaintance with the titles and qualities of the unknown. Henri Lemor, aged 24, native of Paris, laboring mechanic by profession, going to Toulouse, Montpellier, Nîmes, Avignon, and possibly Toulon and Algiers, to seek employment and work at his trade.

"The devil!" quoth the miller to himself; "a laboring mechanic! beloved by a baroness! looking for work, and might perhaps marry a woman who has still 300,000 francs! It is only with us, then, that money is thought more of than love, and the women are so proud! There is not so much distance between the granddaughter of Father Bricolin the laborer, and the grandson of my grandfather the miller, as between a baroness and this poor devil! Ah! Mlle. Rose! I wish Mme. Marcelle could teach you the secret of loving!" Then making up the personal description from the life instead of minding that in the passport, Grand-Louis went on to himself, examining Henri, who was absorbed in reading: "Middling height, pale face — good-looking enough, if you will, but the black beard is ugly. All these Parisian workmen look as if their strength lay in their chins." And the miller took secret satisfaction in the comparison of his athletic limbs with Lemor's more delicate organization. "It seems to me," soliloquized he, "that if it takes nothing more remarkable than this to turn a sensible woman's, ay, and a fair lady's, head, Mlle. Rose might possibly perceive that her humble servant is not worse made than another. But for all that, these Parisians have a certain grace, a manner, black eyes, I don't know what all, that makes us look like boobies beside them. And, then doubtless this fellow has more wit than size. If he could but give me a little, and teach me, too, his secret of winning love!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DIPLOMACY.

FULL in the midst of his reflections, Master Louis suddenly perceived that the young man, lost in still more earnest meditation, was going away without thinking of him.

"Hallo! comrade!" cried Grand-Louis, running after him; "do you want to leave me your passport?"

"Ah, my dear friend, I forgot you, and I ask your pardon!" answered Lemor. "You did me the kindness to give me this letter, and I owe you a thousand thanks. But I recognize you now. I have seen you before, not long since. I received hospitality at your mill — a lovely place — and such a good mother! You are a happy man, for it is plain to see that you are both open-hearted and obliging."

"Yes, a beautiful hospitality to talk about!" said the miller. "But, after all, it was your own fault if you would take nothing but bread and water. That gave me a bad opinion of you, that and your Capuchin's beard! However, you do not look much more like a Jesuit than I do, and if you recall my face, so do I yours. As to being a happy man, you had better envy other people, and especially me! Are you jesting?"

"I do not know what you mean. Has any misfortune happened to you since I saw you?"

"Bah! my misfortune is an old one, and God knows how it will end! But I have no more desire to speak than you to hear of it, for I see that you, too, have a buzzing in your brain. What then! are you not going to give me a word of answer for the person who wrote to you, if it were only to certify that I fulfilled my commission?"

"Then you know that person?" said Lemor, all trembling.

"There now! you had not thought to ask me. Where are your wits?"

Lemor began to be annoyed by the friendly, but bantering and jocose, manner of Grand-Louis. He was afraid of compromising Marcelle, and yet this peasant's countenance was not one to inspire distrust. But Henri thought he should affect indifference.

"I have not, myself, much acquaintance," said he, "with the lady who has done me the honor to write to me. As chance lately took me near her estates in the country, she thought that I might give her some information —"

"Not you, indeed!" interrupted the miller, "as she has no idea that you have been there, still less why you came, and that is what I pray you to tell me, if you would not have me guess."

"That is what I will answer some other time," said Lemor, with some impatience and sarcastic pride. "You are inquisitive, friend, and I know not why you choose to think my conduct mysterious."

"It *is* so, friend! I tell you that it is so, because you did not let *her* know that you had been to the Black Valley!"

The miller's pertinacity became more and more embarrassing, and Henri, fearing lest he should fall into some snare, or commit some imprudence, endeavored to free himself from this odd investigation.

"I know neither of whom nor of what you wish to speak to me," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Again I thank you, and take my leave. If an answer or receipt is needed for the letter which you brought me, I will send it by post. I start in an hour for Toulouse, and have not time to stay here longer with you."

"Ah, you are going to Toulouse!" said the miller, redoubling his pace to follow him. "I should have thought that you would go to Blanchemont with me."

"Why to Blanchemont?"

"Because if you have any advice to give the lady of Blanchemont upon her affairs, as you pretend, it would be more polite to go and speak with her than to write two hasty words. She is well worth the trouble of putting one's self many leagues out of one's way to do her a service; and as for me, who am but a miller, I would go to the ends of the earth for her."

Thus informed, almost in spite of himself, of the spot chosen by Marcelle for her temporary retreat, Lemor could not determine to part rudely from a man who knew her, and seemed so ready to talk about her. His young brain, which was voluntarily stoic, but deeply shaken by passion, was dazzled by the sort of proposition or advice given him to go to Blanchemont. He imagined that he concealed the contradictory desires and resolutions which agitated him, but the penetrating miller was not to be deceived, and read the perplexity of his mind written on his face. "If I thought," said Lemor at last, "that verbal explanations were necessary — but indeed I do not — this lady intimates nothing of the kind —"

"Yes," replied the miller in a mocking tone; "*this lady* thinks you in Paris, and one does not send for a man to come so far for a few words. But perhaps if she had known you were so near, she would have ordered me to bring you back with me."

"No, Master Miller, you are mistaken," said Henri, alarmed at Grand-Louis's penetration. "The questions I have the honor to receive are not important enough for that. I will decidedly reply by letter."

And in choosing this latter course, Henri felt as if his heart would break. For notwithstanding his submission to Marcelle's commands, all his energetic blood boiled at the idea of seeing her once more before leaving her for a whole year. But this cursed miller, with his commentaries, might, through malice or levity, make this step injure the young widow, and Lemor felt that he must deny himself.

"You will do as you please," said Grand-Louis, somewhat piqued by his reserve; "but as *she* will doubtless question me about you, I shall be obliged to tell her that you seemed no way pleased at the idea of coming to see her."

"She will certainly be much distressed!" answered Lemor, with a forced laugh.

"Yes, yes! play Master Sly with me, comrade!" retorted the miller. "But you do not laugh from your heart."

"Mr. Miller," replied Lemor, losing all patience, "your insinuations, as far as I can understand them, begin to be quite mistimed. I do not know whether you are as much devoted to the person in question as you pretend; but it does not seem to me that you speak of her with as much respect as I, who scarcely know her."

"You are angry? So much the better! it is more frank, and teases me less than your jesting. Now I know how to deal with you."

"This is too much," said the irritated Lemor, "and looks like a personal provocation. I do not know what absurd ideas you may attribute to me, but I warn you that I am tired of this game, and will not endure your impertinence much longer."

"Are you getting angry in earnest?" said Grand-Louis, calmly. "I am ready to satisfy you. I am much stronger than you, but you are doubtless companion in some order, and understand single-stick. And, besides, they say that you Parisians all know the use of the quarter-staff as well as professors. Now we know nothing of the theory, we have only the practice. You are probably more skilful than I — as for me, I shall hit harder than you — that will make the match even. We will go behind the old rampart, if you like, or better, to Father Robichon's café. He has a little court where we can come to a good understanding without interruption, for he knows too much to call the police."

"Come," said Lemor, to himself, "I have chosen to be a workman, and the laws of honor are as strict with the stick as with the sword. I do not know the savage art of killing a fellow-creature any better with one weapon than with another. But if this Gallic Hercules desires the pleasure of mauling me, I will not avoid it by talking sense to him. Besides, it is the only way to get rid of his questions, and I do not see why I should be more patient than a gentleman."

The generous and pacific miller had no desire to fix a quarrel upon Henri, as the latter supposed, from not understanding his real interest in Mme. de Blanchemont, and consequently in himself; it was simply the distrust mingled with this last sentiment, from which Grand-Louis wished to free his mind by an open explanation. Not succeeding, he thought himself provoked in his turn, and, on their way to the Café Robichon, each of the adversaries was persuaded that he was forced to comply with the belligerent temper of the other.

The clock of a neighboring steeple struck six as they came to the café. It was a small house, adorned with the pompous title "Café de la Renaissance," now seen upon every little provincial cabarêt. They entered through a narrow alley, bordered with young acacias and superb dahlias. The little court of explanations was beneath the wall of a Gothic church, covered in this place with ivy and climbing roses. Arbors of honeysuckle and clematis protected it from intrusive eyes, and perfumed the morning air. This flowery nook, now solitary and neatly sanded, seemed intended rather for a lover's trysting-place than for scenes of a tragic nature.

Grand-Louis ushered Lemor in, closed the gate behind him, and then, seating himself at a small green wooden table —

"So, then!" said he, "are we here to deal each other blows, or to take a cup of coffee together?"

"Just as you please," replied Lemor. "I will fight with you if you wish; but I will take no coffee."

"You are too proud for that! plain enough why," said Grand-Louis, with a shrug. "When one receives letters from a baroness!"

"You are beginning again? Come, either let me be off, or let us fight at once."

"I cannot fight with you," said the miller. "You need only look at me, I think, to see that I am no coward, and yet I refuse the match you offer me. Mme. de Blanchemont would never forgive me, and that would ruin me altogether."

"What matter for that? If you think Mme. de Blanchemont would blame you for being quarrelsome, you need not tell her that you picked the quarrel."

"So! then it was I who picked the quarrel? Who was it spoke first of fighting?"

"It seems to me that nobody except yourself has spoken of it, but it is very little matter. I accept the proposal."

"But who, then, insulted the other? I said nothing to you but what was civil, and you treated me as impertinent."

"You interpreted my words and my thoughts in an unmannerly fashion. I requested you to let me alone."

"Oh! that is it! You bid me hold my tongue! And supposing I will not, what then?"

"I shall turn my back upon you, and if you take it ill, we will fight."

"This fellow is obstinate as all the devils!" cried Grand-Louis, striking with his huge fist upon the little table, which was cleft by the blow.

"There! Mr. Parisian! you see what a heavy hand that is! Your pride might give me a fancy to try whether your head were as hard as that oaken board; for there is nothing on earth more insolent than to say to a man, 'I will not hear you.' And yet I ought not. I cannot injure a hair of that iron head. Hark you! we must make an end of this. Still, I wish you well, and above all do I wish well to a certain person for whom I would break my arms and legs, and who has, I am sure, a fancy for interesting herself in you. We must understand one another; I will ask you no more questions, since it is lost pains, but I will tell you all that I have on my mind for and against you; and when I have done, if you are not suited, we will fight; and if what I suspect of you is true, I should not be sorry to break your jaw.

Come, it is best to make matters clear before trying strength, and know why one does it! We will have coffee, for I am fasting since yesterday, and my stomach cries for mercy. If you are too great a lord to let me pay the scot, let us agree that the least maimed of the two shall settle it after all is over."

"Agreed!" said Henri, who, considering himself on hostile terms with the miller, thought there could be no risk of forgetting himself with him through friendliness.

Father Robichon himself brought the coffee, testifying all manner of kindness towards Grand-Louis. "Is he one of thy friends?" said he, looking at Lemor with the curiosity always felt by tradespeople in small towns, who have not much to do. "I do not know him, but it is all the same; he must be good for something, since thou bringest him to me. Look you, my boy," added he, addressing Lemor, "you have made a good acquaintance on coming our way. You could not have had better luck. Grand-Louis is esteemed by each and all. I now — I love him like a son. Oh, he is so wise, good, and gentle — gentle as a lamb, though he is the strongest man in the country — but I can truly say that never, no, never, has he made any disturbance. He would not give a cuff to a child, and I never heard him raise his voice in my house. God knows that there are often quarrelsome people here, but he always brings peace with him."

This eulogium, so oddly timed at the moment when Grand-Louis had brought a stranger to the Café Robichon to try a quarrel with him, made both the young men smile.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FORD OF THE VAUVRE.

THE panegyric appeared, nevertheless, so sincere, that Lemor, already disposed to great sympathy for the miller, and reflecting on the singularity of his conduct in this instance, began to consider that this man must have powerful motives for questioning him. They took coffee together with much mutual politeness, and when Father Robichon had left them to themselves, the miller began thus:

"*Sir* (I must call you so since I do not know whether we are friends or foes), you must know in the first place that I am in love, by your good pleasure, with a girl too rich for me, and who loves me only just enough not to detest me. Thus I can speak of her without compromising her; and besides, you do not know her. I do not like, however, to talk of my love, it is tiresome for others, especially when they have been stung by the same fly, and are, as is customary in this malady, devilish egotists, caring everything for themselves and nothing for their neighbors. Nevertheless, as one gains nothing by working all alone to remove a mountain, I am of opinion that by a little mutual friendly assistance something at least might be done, and this is why I desired your confidence, since I have that of the lady whom you well know, and why I give you mine without any particular certainty of its being well placed.

"Well, then, the girl I love will have for her dowry 30,000 francs more than I, and, as times are, I might as well think of marrying the Empress of China. I do not care a snap for her 30,000 francs; indeed I may say that I wish them at the bottom of the sea, since it is they who separate us. But love never yet listened to hinderances; although I am penniless, I am in love; I can think of nothing else; and if the lady, whom you well know, does not come to my relief, as she has given me to hope, I am a lost man — I may — I don't know what I may not do!"

While speaking thus, there came so dark a change over the miller's usually jovial face, that Lemor was struck by the strength and sincerity of his passion.

"Well, then," said he to him, cordially, "since you have the protection of so good and intelligent a lady — she is called so at least! —"

"I do not know what she *is called*," retorted Grand-Louis, out of patience with the young man's obstinate reserve; "I know what I myself think, and I tell you that this woman is an angel of heaven. The worse for you, if you do not know it!"

"In that case," said Lemor, unable to resist the sincerity of this homage to Marcelle, "what are you aiming at, my dear M. Grand-Louis?"

"I wish to tell you, that seeing this good, noble, and pure-hearted woman disposed kindly towards me, and already beginning to give me hope when I thought all lost, I am attached to her at once and forever. Friendship came to me, as they say in romances that love comes, in a flash, and now I want to return beforehand all the good that this woman intends to do me. I want her to be happy as she deserves, happy in her affections, since she cares for nothing else in the world, and despises fortune, happy in the love of a man who shall love her for herself, and not be busy in calculating what remains of the wealth she loses so joyously — only thinking how to find out what she does or does not possess — that he may know whether to rejoin her, or take himself far away from her — forget her, doubtless — and try if his pretty face can make another more lucrative conquest — for —"

Lemor interrupted the miller.

"What reason have you," said he, turning pale, "to fear that this worthy lady has so misplaced her affections? Who is the villain to whom you impute such dastardly conduct?"

"I know nothing about it," said the miller, attentively observant of Henri's agitation, and not yet certain whether to attribute it to the indignation of conscious rectitude or the shame of detection. "All that I know is that there came to my mill, some fortnight since, a young man of very honest face and manners, who seemed to have some weight upon his mind, and, all at once, began to talk of money, to ask questions, take notes, and at last to assure himself in francs and centimes, on a bit of paper, that a pretty slice of her fortune was still left to the lady of Blanchemont."

"The truth is, you think this fellow was ready to declare his love only in case the marriage appeared advantageous to him? Then he was a scoundrel; but to have guessed so well, one's self need be — "

"Go on, Parisian! Don't pick your words," said the miller, whose eyes flashed like lightning. "We are here to understand one another!"

"I say," repeated Lemor, not less provoked, "that when a man makes such interpretation of the conduct of another with whom he is not acquainted, and of whom he knows nothing, he must be himself much in love with his mistress's dowry."

The miller's eyes faded, and a cloud passed over his brow.

"Ah!" said he, in a mournful tone, "I know that might be said, and I warrant that many people would say so, if I succeeded in making myself beloved! But only let her father disinherit her, which would certainly happen if she were to love me, and then they should see if I would count up what she had lost on my fingers!"

"Miller!" said Lemor, in a frank and hasty tone, "I do not accuse you. I do not wish to suspect you. But how is it, that with an honest soul, you have not supposed what is most likely and most worthy of you?"

"The young man's feeling would be shown by his subsequent actions. If he rushed with transport to his dear lady! — I say nothing; but if he takes himself to the devil, that is another affair!"

"It should be presumed," answered Lemor, "that he looked upon his love as madness, and did not wish to expose himself to a refusal."

"Ah! there you are!" cried the miller. "Here come the lies again! I know positively that the lady is rejoiced to have lost her fortune, that she has also taken bravely her share in her son's total ruin, and all because she loves some one, whom, without all these catastrophes, it might have been called a crime in her to marry."

"Her son is ruined?" said Lemor, starting; "totally ruined? Is it possible? Are you sure of it?"

"Perfectly sure, my boy!" replied the miller, in a jeering manner. "The administratrix, who, during a long minority, might have shared the interest of a large capital with a lover or husband, will have nothing but debts to pay, so that her intention, as she told me last night, is to have her boy learn some trade for a living."

Henri had left his seat, and was pacing the little court with agitated steps, and the expression of his face was indefinable. Grand-Louis, who did not take his eyes off him, questioned with himself whether he was at the height of joy or disappointment. "We will see," thought he, "whether he is a man, like *her* and like me, hating the riches which thwart love, or an adventurer who has won her love by some inconceivable craft, and whose ambition looks higher than the enjoyment of the little revenue which is left to her."

After a few moments' thought, Grand-Louis, who had set his heart on giving Marcelle a great pleasure, or ridding her of a deceiver by unmasking him, imagined a strategem.

"Come, my boy!" said he, in a milder voice, "you are vexed! There is no harm in that. Everybody is not romantic, and if you were thinking of the cash, you were only like all the people nowadays. You see now that I have not done you an ill turn by quarrelling with you; you have learned that the jointure has run dry. You doubtless reckoned on the profits of the young heir's minority, for you were aware that the famous three hundred thousand francs was a last, a sheer illusion of the widow's?"

"What do you say?" cried Lemor, pausing in his hurried walk; "is this last resource taken from her?"

"To be sure! don't pretend not to know it; you took your information too carefully not to know that Farmer Bricolin's debt is quadruple what was supposed, and that the lady of Blanchemont will have to sue for a tobacco * or post-office, to have the means of sending her son to school."

"Is it possible?" repeated Lemor, confounded and almost stupefied by this news. "So sudden a change in her destiny! A stroke from heaven!"

"Yes, a thunder-stroke!" said the miller, with a bitter laugh.

"Oh! tell me, is she not at all affected?"

"Oh! not in the least. So far from it, on the contrary, she fancies that you will only love her the better. But you — not such a fool, are you?"

"My dear friend," replied Lemor, without hearing a word, "what have you told me? And I, who wanted to fight with you — you have done me a great service! When I was about—you are sent to me by Providence!"

Grand-Louis, attributing this effusion to Lemor's satisfaction in being warned in time of the ruin of his mercenary hopes, turned away his head in disgust, and remained for some instants absorbed in deep melancholy.

"To see so confiding and disinterested a woman," said he to himself, "cozened by such a puppy! She must have as little judgment as he has heart. I ought to have thought, indeed, that she was very imprudent, when in a single day, the first time I ever saw her, she let me discover all her secrets. She is ready to yield her good heart to the first comer. Oh! I must scold her, warn her, put her on her guard against herself in everything! And to begin, I must rid her of this rogue. One might tear the rascal's ear a little, or give him a mark on his fine *viznomy*, that should hinder him from showing himself so soon among the ladies — Hallo! Mr. Parisian!" said he, without turning round, and endeavoring to make his voice calm and clear; "you have heard me, and now you know how much I think of you. I know what I wished to know — you are nothing but a scoundrel. That is my opinion, and I will prove it to you immediately, if you will please to permit it."

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* Tobacco, in France, is a government monopoly. — *Tr.*

While speaking, the miller had phlegmatically turned up his sleeves, intending to use only his fists, and he now rose and turned, surprised at his adversary's delay in answering. But to his great astonishment, he found himself alone in the court. He ran through the dahlia alley, hunted in all the corners of the Café Robichon, surveyed all the neighboring streets; Lemor had disappeared. No one had seen him go out. Indignant and almost furious, Grand-Louis sought for him vainly all through the town.

After an hour of useless investigation, the miller was out of breath, and began to be tired and discouraged.

"It is all the same," said he to himself, sitting down upon a stone; "there shall not a diligence or a patache leave the town this day, but I will count the passengers, and look every one of them in the face. This gentleman shall not go off without — but pshaw! I am mad! Is he not on foot, and does not a man who shirks paying a debt of honor take to the fields without drum or trumpet? And then," added he, growing calmer by degrees, "my dear Madame Marcelle would doubtless be angry with me for thrashing her gallant. That is no way to cure so strong an attachment; and perhaps the poor woman will not believe me when I tell her that her Parisian is a true *Marchois*.* How can I undeceive her? It is my duty; and yet, when I think of the pain I shall give her — Dear lady of the good God! Is it possible one can be so deluded?"

While thus talking with himself, the miller remembered that he had a carriage to sell, and went to a wealthy ex-farmer, who, after long examination and cheapening, was finally decided by his fear lest M. Bricolin should seize upon a thing which was at once an article of luxury and a good bargain. "Buy it, M. Ravelard," said Grand-Louis, with the admirable patience which belongs to the Berrichons, when, perfectly understanding that their terms are to be accepted, they politely feign to be duped by the assumed uncertainty of the purchaser. "I have told you two hundred times already, and I will repeat it as often as you wish, it is good and handsome, fine and substantial. It came from the first establishment in Paris, and you get it free of freight. You know me too well to think I would be concerned in the business if there were any trap under it. Besides, I ask no commission of you, which you would have to pay to anybody else. See! it is clear profit!"

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* The natives of La Marche are, with or without reason, in such bad odor with their neighbors of Berri, that *Marchois* is synonymous with cheat.

The buyer's irresolutions lasted till evening. It tore his soul to pay down the crowns. When Grand-Louis saw the sun setting —

"Come," said he, "I do not want to sleep here, and I am off. I see that you will not have this pretty shining wagon, as cheap as it is. I shall harness Sophie to it, and go back to Blanchemont as proud as Pompey. It will be the first time in my life that I drive a carriage; that will divert me, and I shall be yet more diverted to see Father and Mother Bricolin strut into it to go to La Châtre of a Sunday! I still think that you and your wife would cut a finer figure in it."

At length, as the night came on, M. Ravelard counted out the money, and had the fine carriage put under his coach-house. Grand-Louis loaded his cart with Mme. de Blanchemont's effects, put the two thousand francs in a leathern girdle, and started with Sophie at full trot, sitting on a trunk, and singing at the top of his voice, notwithstanding the jolts and the rumbling of his great wheels over the pavement.

He drove quickly, with no risk of losing his way, like the patachon, and the moon had not yet risen when he passed the pretty village of Mers. The chilling mist, that even in the warmest summer nights floats over the numerous embanked streams of the Black Valley, lay in white sheets, that might have been mistaken for lakes, over the low places in the vast and gloomy extent of country opening before him. The harvesters' cries and the shepherds' song had already ceased, and soon the glow-worms, gleaming here and there on the roadside, were the only living creatures on the miller's way.

Nevertheless, while crossing one of the marshy tracts made by the windings of rivers in a country otherwise so fertile and so scrupulously cultivated, he thought he saw a dim figure running through the reeds before him, which stopped at the edge of the ford as if to wait for him.

Grand-Louis was not much subject to fear. However, as he had on this occasion to defend a little property, of which he was more careful than if it had been his own, he hastened to rejoin his cart, for he had come part of the way on foot, as much to stretch his limbs as to ease his faithful Sophie. Finding the leathern girdle inconvenient, he had put it in a sack of corn. When he had remounted his car, which he facetiously called, after the country fashion, his equipage hung on *wagon-leather*, that is, on plain wood, he took a firm stand on his legs, armed himself with his whip, whose heavy handle rendered it a weapon of double action, and upright as a soldier on duty he drove straight up to the night-traveller, gayly chanting a stanza from an old comic opera, which Rose had taught him in his childhood:

"Our miller's purse is full of gold,
And now for home he gayly pushes,
When on the way he hears, I'm told,
A monstrous rustling in the bushes.
Our miller is a sturdy fellow,
But then, they say, he turned quite yellow.
So, friends, beware,
Take mickle care,
Through the Black Valley never wander."

I believe that the song has it "the Black Forest"; but Grand-Louis, who mocked at poetic rule as much as at ghosts and robbers, amused himself with adapting the words to his own situation, and this simple stanza, formerly much in vogue, but now sung only at the mill of Angibault, often beguiled the tedium of his solitary rides.

When he was near the man, who firmly awaited him, he saw that the post was well chosen for an attack. The ford was not, indeed, deep, but encumbered with large stones, which obliged a horse to walk carefully; and besides, the descent into the water was so steep as to make it necessary to hold in the reins lest the animal should fall.

"We shall see," said Grand-Louis to himself, with great composure and prudence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HENRI.

THE wayfarer did in fact advance to the horse's head, and Grand-Louis, who, during his roundelay, had dexterously fastened to his whip-lash a ball of lead pierced for the purpose, had already raised his arm to make him let go, when a voice that he knew said amicably:

"Master Louis, permit me to cross the water in your vehicle."

"Oh ho! my dear Parisian!" replied the miller; "delighted to see you. I hunted for you long enough this morning! Up, up, — I have two words to say to you."

"And as for me, I have more than two to ask of you," answered Henri Lemor, springing into the cart, and taking a seat on the trunk beside him, with the confidence of a man who expects nothing disagreeable.

"This is a bold dog," thought the miller, who, in the first return of his rancor, could hardly restrain himself till they should reach the other bank. "Do you know, comrade," said he, laying his heavy hand upon the other's shoulder, "that I do not know what keeps me from turning about to the right, and giving you a ducking under the sluice there?"

"It is an amusing idea," answered Lemor, quietly, "and practicable to a certain degree. Still, my dear friend, I think I should make a stout defence, for to-night is the first time for a long while that I hold to my life tenaciously."

"Now!" said the miller, as he drew up on the sand at the other side of the stream. "We can talk better here. First and foremost, do me the kindness, my dear sir, to tell me where you are going?"

"I do not know myself," said Lemor, laughing. "I believe I shall follow where chance leads. Is it not a fine evening for a walk?"

"Not so fine as you think, my master, and you may go back in worse weather, if such be my good pleasure. You chose to come into my cart. It is my travelling fortress, and people do not always get out as they got in."

"A truce to repartee, Grand-Louis," returned Lemor, "and whip up your horse. I can laugh no more, I feel too much —"

"Confess the truth, you are afraid."

"Yes, dreadfully afraid, like the miller in your song, and you will understand when I tell you — if I can speak — I have scarcely my senses."

"In short, where are you going?" said the miller, who began to fear he had misjudged Lemor, and recovering his reason, which had been lost in his anger, asked himself whether a guilty man would thus voluntarily place himself again in his power.

"Where are you going yourself?" said Lemor. "To Angibault, near Blanchemont? I, too, go in that direction, without knowing whether I shall dare to go quite there. But you have heard of the loadstone which attracts the iron?"

"I do not know whether you are made of iron," returned the miller, "but I know there is a famous loadstone that way for me also. Come, my boy, you would wish —"

"I wish nothing, I dare not wish anything! and yet she is ruined, entirely ruined? Why should I go away?"

"What could make you want to go so far, to Africa, to the devil?"

"I believed her still rich; as I told you, compared to my situation, 300,000 francs was opulence."

"But since she loved you, notwithstanding?"

"And do you imagine that I could have accepted money with love? I can feign no longer with you, friend. I see that things have been confided to you which I would not have avowed, had we come to blows upon it. But I reflected, after leaving you so abruptly, when I scarce knew what I was doing, and felt my heart so big with joy that I could not have held my tongue — yes, I reflected on all that you had said, and saw that you knew all, and that it was absurd in me to fear indiscretion from so devoted a friend to — "

"Marcelle!" said the miller, with a little vanity at being able familiarly to pronounce this *Christian* name, as in his mind he defined it, in opposition to the aristocratic title of the lady of Blanchemont.

Lemor thrilled at this name. It sounded in his ear for the first time. As he had never had any connection with those who surrounded Mme. de Blanchemont, and never confided the secret of his love to any one, he knew not from other lips the sound of this cherished name, which he had read with such reverence at the end of many a note, and never himself dared to pronounce but in moments of despair or rapture. He seized the miller's arm, divided between the desire to make him repeat it, and the fear of profaning it by giving it to the solitary echoes.

"Well, then," said Grand-Louis, touched by his emotion, "you have at last found out that you neither should nor could distrust me? But would you have me tell you the truth? I still distrust you a little. It is in spite of myself, but the idea pursues me, quits me, and again seizes me. Let us see, — where have you been all day? I thought you were hid in a cellar!"

"I should have been, I believe, if I had found one convenient," said Lemor, with a smile, "I so much needed to hide my distress and my rapture. Do you know, my friend, that I was going to Africa, intending never again to see — her whom you have just named? Yes, notwithstanding the note you brought me, which commanded me to return in one year, I felt that my conscience exacted a dreadful sacrifice. And even to-day I was filled with fear and uncertainty; for if I, a working-man, have no longer to combat the shame of marrying a rich woman, still there remains the enmity of race, the struggle of the plebeian against the patricians, who will persecute this noble woman for a choice they will deem unworthy. Yet there may be cowardice in avoiding this crisis. It is not her fault that she is of the blood of the oppressors, and then, too, the power of the nobility has passed into other hands. Their opinion has lost its force, and perhaps she — who deigns to prefer me — will not meet universal blame. Still, is it not terrible to involve the woman one loves in a contest with her family, and to draw upon her the blame of all those with whom she has always lived! These attachments are secondary, it is true, but numerous and dear. A generous heart cannot break from them without regret, and by what other affections shall I replace them? For I am isolated upon the earth, as the poor always are, and the people do not yet understand how to greet those who come to them from such a distance, and through so many obstacles. Alas! I spent part of the day under a hedge, I know not where, in a retired place where I chanced to be, and it was only after hours of anguish and earnest thought that I determined to seek you, and ask you to procure me an hour's interview with her. I sought you in vain, and perhaps you, too, were looking for me, for it was you who filled my brain with this burning idea of going to Blanchemont. But I believe that you are imprudent and I mad, for *she* forbid my knowing even where she had retired, and she fixed, for the propriety of her mourning, the delay of a year."

"Is it so indeed?" said Grand-Louis, somewhat frightened at having aroused in Marcelle's lover the idea of going to see her, by the suggestion he had thought so ingenious in the morning. "Are these notions of propriety of which you speak so serious in your mind, and is it necessary that a year, neither more nor less, should pass after the death of a wicked husband, before an honest woman can see the face of an honest man who intends to marry her? Is that the custom at Paris?"

"Not more at Paris than elsewhere. The religious feeling belonging to the mystery of death is everywhere, doubtless, the nearest arbiter of the greater or less time granted to the remembrance of the funeral rites."

"I know that it is a right feeling which has established the custom of testifying mourning in dress, habits, and general conduct; but is there not danger of its degenerating into hypocrisy, when there is really little to regret in the deceased, and when love speaks plainly in favor of another? Is it necessary to the decent demeanor of a widow that her suitor should expatriate himself, and never pass her door, or even glance at her when she does not appear to see?"

"You do not know, my dear fellow, the malignity of those who call themselves *people of the world.* It is a singular denomination, and yet just in their eyes, since they count the people as nothing, and arrogate the empire of the world, which they have always had, and have still — for a time!"

"It is not hard for me to credit," cried the miller, "that they are more wicked than we! And yet," he added mournfully, "we are not as good as we should be! We, too, babble, and taunt, and condemn the weak. Yes, you are right, we must guard against evil being spoken of this dear lady. With time she will be known, beloved, and respected as she deserves, but now a single day might bring an accusation of light conduct against her. So it is my advice that you should not show yourself at Blanchemont."

"You are a man of good judgment, Grand-Louis, and I was sure that you would not let me do anything wrong. I will have the courage to listen to your reasonable opinion, as I had the folly to take fire at the first impulse of your kind feeling. I will talk with you till we are near your mill, and then I will return to * * *, and continue my journey to-morrow."

"Come! come! you go from one extreme to the other," said the miller, who had let his patient Sophie walk, while talking with Lemor. "Angibault is a league from Blanchemont, and you can easily pass the night there without compromising any one. My old mother will be the only woman you will find to-night, and that will make no gossip. You have had a pretty walk from * * * here, and I should have neither heart nor soul if I did not force you to accept a bed, with what the curate, who does not fancy them, calls a *frugal* supper. Besides, must not you write? You will find all that is necessary with us — beautiful letter-paper, for example! I am clerk of my district, and I do not write my deeds upon vellum; but even if your amorous prose should lie on government stamped paper, that will not hinder it from being read, and perhaps twice rather than once. Come, I tell you, I see already the smoke of my supper rising among the trees; we will trot a little, for I will warrant that my old mother is hungry, and will not eat without me. I promised her I would be at home early."

Henri was dying to accept the good miller's offer. For form's sake he let himself be urged; lovers dissemble like children. He had given up the folly of going to Blanchemont, but he was drawn in that direction as by a magic charm; and each of Sophie's steps which brought him nearer this centre of attraction, stirred the poor heart, just crushed by a struggle beyond its master's strength. So he yielded, secretly blessing the miller's hospitable urgency.

"Mother!" cried the latter to Grand'-Marie, as he leaped from his cart, "have I broken my word to you? If the good God's clock is not out of order, the stars of the cross mark ten upon St. James's Way." *

"That is all," said the good woman; "it is only an hour later than thou expectedst. But I will not scold thee. I see that thou hast done our dear lady's errands. Dost thou mean to carry all that to Blanchemont to-night?"

"No, by my faith! it is too late. Madame Marcelle told me that a day sooner or later did not matter. And then, too, can one get into the new chateau after ten o'clock? Have not they mended the embattled court wall, and put iron bars on the great gate? They are capable of setting up a drawbridge over their dry ditch! The devil take me! M. Bricolin thinks himself already lord of Blanchemont, and will soon have a coat-of-arms over his chimney. He will be called *de* Bricolin — but look here, mother, I bring you company Do you recognize this lad?"

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*The cross is the constellation of the Swan, and the Milky Way that of St. James.

"Eh! it is the gentleman of last month!" said Grand'-Marie; "the one whom we took for one of the lady of Blanchemont's agents! But it seems she does not know him."

"No, no, she does not know him at all," said Grand-Louis, "and he is no agent; he is a clerk of the registry for the new assessment of taxes. Come, geometer, sit down and eat while the meat is warm."

"Tell us then, sir," said the miller's mother, when the first course, namely, the lentil soup, was despatched, "was it you who wrote your name upon one of our trees on the river-bank?"

"It was I," said Henri. "I ask your pardon for it; perhaps my foolish school-boy trick killed the young willow?"

"Saving your presence, it is a white birch," said the miller. "You are a true Parisian, and doubtless do not know flax from potatoes. But no matter. Our trees laugh at the strokes of your pen-knife, and my mother asks you only for talk."

"Oh! I would not say a word to you for a little tree. We have enough beside," said the old woman, "but our young lady was so troubled to know who could have cut that name there! And her little boy read it all himself! Yes, sir, a child of four saw what I could never see in letters!"

"She has been here then?" said Lemor inconsiderately, and without full possession of his senses at the moment.

"What is that to you, since you do not know her?" answered Grand-Louis, giving him a great punch with his knee to remind him to feign, especially before his mill-boy.

Lemor thanked him with a look, although the warning was none of the gentlest; and fearing his own imprudence, did not again open his mouth, except to eat.

When they separated for the night, as Lemor was to share the miller's little room on the ground-floor, opposite the mill, he requested Grand-Louis not to fasten the door yet, but to let him walk awhile on the banks of the Vauvre.

"Pardy, and I will go with you," said Grand-Louis, much interested in his new friend's romance, by its resemblance to his own. "I know where you are going, and I am in no such hurry to sleep that I should not take a turn with you in the moonlight, for there is the moon rising, and gleaming on the water. Come, my Parisian, see how silvery and proud she is in the basin of the Vauvre, and say if you ever have so fair a moon and so beautiful a river in Paris! There!" he added, when they came to the foot of the tree, "there is where *she* leant while she read your name. She was this way against the rail, and she looked with eyes — such as I could never make, though I should spend two hours in opening mine. So then, you knew she would come here, that you left her your signature?"

"The strangest thing about it is that I did not know it, and that mere chance — a childish caprice — suggested to me to leave this token of my passage through a lovely spot which I never thought to see again. I heard at Paris that she was ruined. I hoped so! I came to learn what I might depend upon, and when I found that she was still too rich for me, I thought only of bidding her farewell."

"See you now! There is a God for lovers, or you never would have returned here, in fact. It was this — it was Mme. Marcelle's manner when she questioned me about the young traveller who had cut this name — that made me guess all at once that she loved, and that her lover was named Henri. That was what sharpened my wits to divine the rest, for nothing has been said to me. I have guessed everything else, I must confess, though I boast of it also."

"How! nothing has been confided to you, and I have confessed all? God's will be done! I see His hand in all this, and I can no longer choose but yield to the absolute confidence with which you inspire me."

"I wish I could say as much to you," said Grand-Louis, taking his hand, "for may the devil pound me if I do not love you! And still there is something that always worries me."

"How can you yet still suspect me, when I return to your Black Valley only to breathe the air which she has breathed, when I know at last that she is poor?"

"But might not you have been among the notaries and lawyers while I was looking for you this morning? And if you had learned that she is still rich?"

"What do you say? Can it be true?" cried Lemor, in a woful tone. "Do not play so with me, friend! you accuse me of things so absurd, that I do not even think of justifying myself. But one thing I must tell you in a word. If Madame de Blanchemont is still rich, though she would accept the love of a working-man like me, I must quit her forever. Oh! if it be so, if I must know it, not yet, in Heaven's name! Let me dream of happiness till to-morrow, till I leave this country for a year, or forever!"

"Now, good friend, you are a little cracked," cried the miller. "And at this moment you even seem so exaggerated, that I fear lest it be an attempt to deceive me."

"You are not like me, then? You do not hate wealth?"

"No, I neither hate nor love it for itself, but for the good or evil it can do me. For example, I detest Father Bricolin's gold, because it hinders me from marrying his daughter — ah! the deuce! I let slip names that you might as well be ignorant of — But I know your affairs, after all, and you may as well know mine. So I say that I detest that gold; but I should heartily like to have thirty or forty thousand francs fall on me from the sky, and enable me to propose to Rose."

"I do not think as you do. If I owned a million, I would not keep it."

"You would throw it into the river rather than make a title from it to reëstablish equality between *her* and you? You are a droll chap, after all."

"I think I should distribute it among the poor, like the early communist Christians, so as to rid myself of it, though I know very well that it would not be doing any real good, for those first disciples of equality formed a society, when they gave up their property, and gave to the unfortunate a legislation which was at the same time a religion. That money was food for the soul as well as for the body. There was a doctrine of mutual division, and it had its adepts. There is nothing like it now. There is, indeed, the conception of a holy and providential community, but its laws are as yet unknown. The little world of the first Christians cannot be renewed, for this doctrine would be its first necessity; we have it not, and besides, men are not disposed to receive it. The money which might be distributed among a handful of wretches would breed only selfishness and indolence in them, unless they were at the same time instructed in the duties of association. And I repeat to you, friend, there is not yet on the one side intelligence enough in the initiators, nor on the other enough confidence, sympathy, and impulse in the initiated. This is why, when Marcelle (I dare name her, too, now that you have named Rose) proposed to me to do like the apostles, and give this wealth at which I shuddered to the poor, I recoiled before her sacrifice, for I did not feel in myself sufficient science and genius to make it fruitful in her hands for the progress of humanity. To possess riches and render them useful, as I understand the term, there needs a man of more than heart — of genius. I am not such an one, and in thinking on the rooted vices, the fearful selfishness induced by the possession of fortune, I feel myself cold with dread. I thank God for having made me poor — I, who just escaped a large heritage — and I swear never to possess more than my week's wages!"

"So, you thank God for having made you wise by a pure act of His goodness, and you profit by the chance that has preserved you from evil? It is a mighty easy virtue, and I am not so much amazed at it as you may think. Now I understand why Mme. Marcelle was so pleased yesterday at being ruined. You put all these fine things into her head! It is very pretty, but it means nothing. What is it more than if one should say, 'If I were rich, I should be wicked, and I am rejoiced not to be so'? It is just like my grandmother saying, 'I do not like eels, and I am very glad of it, for if I liked them I should eat them.' Let us see why should you not be rich and generous? Why, even if you did nothing better than to give bread to those around us who are in want, that would be already something, and the money would be better placed in your hands than in those of misers — oh, I know what you would have. I have understood — I am not so stupid as you think, and I have read, now and then, newspapers and pamphlets, from which I know a little of what is going on beyond our farms, where it is true enough that there is nothing new — I see that you are a maker of new systems, an economist, a philosopher!"

"No. It is, perhaps, a misfortune, but I know less of the science of numbers than of any other, and nothing of what is at the present day understood by political economy. It is a vicious circle, in which I can imagine no amusement in turning."

"You have not studied a science without which you can try nothing new? In that case, you are indolent."

"No, but a dreamer."

"I understand. You are what is called a poet."

"I have never made verses, and now I am a workman. Do not take me so seriously. I am a child, and a lovesick child. My only merit is to have learned my trade, and I am about to practise it."

"That is well! gain your living as I do mine, and do not plague yourself as to the way the world goes, since you can do nothing about it."

"What reasoning, my friend! Suppose you were bound to this tree, and saw a boat capsize on the river with a family on board; would you see them perish with indifference because you could not help them?"

"No, sir, I would break the tree, were it ten times as large. I should have such good will, that God would perform this little miracle for me."

"And yet the human family perishes," cried Lemor, mournfully, "and God does no more miracles!"

"True enough! nobody believes in Him. But I believe in Him, and I declare to you, since we are in a way to keep nothing from each other, that in my *secretest* thought, I have never despaired of marrying Rose Bricolin. Yet to bring her father to accept a poor son-in-law, would be a more amazing miracle than to break with my arm alone the great tree before you. Well! this miracle will be performed, I know not how; I shall have fifty thousand francs. I shall find them in the ground when I plant my cabbages, or in the river as I throw my nets, or some idea — no matter what — will come to me. I shall discover something, since an idea, they say, is enough to move the world."

"You will discover the means of applying equality to a society which only exists through inequality, will you not?" said Henri, with a melancholy smile.

"Why not, sir?" returned the miller, with cheerful vivacity. "When I have my fortune, as I should not like to be avaricious and wicked, and as I am very sure of never becoming either, any more than my grandmother ever became fond of eels, which she could not endure, then I must be all at once wiser than you, and find in my brain what you have not found in your books: namely, the secret of doing justice with my power, and giving happiness with my wealth. Does that amaze you? Nevertheless, my Parisian, I declare to you that I know less of political economy than you, and understand neither the *a* nor *b* of it. But what of that, since I have will and faith? Read the Gospel, sir. My opinion is that you, who talk so well about it, have forgotten that the first apostles were men of nothing, knowing nothing, like me. The good God breathed upon them, and they knew more than all the school-masters and curates of their time."

"O people! thou prophesyest!" cried Lemor, straining the miller to his heart. "It is indeed for thee that

God will perform miracles; the Holy Ghost will breathe upon thee! Thou knowest not discouragement; thou doubtest of nothing. Thou feelest that the heart is stronger than science; thou feelest thy force, thy love, and thou art sure of inspiration! This is the reason that I burned my books — this is why I wished to return to the ranks of the people, from which my parents forced me. This is why I go among the poor and simple in heart, to seek that faith and zeal which I have lost in growing great among the rich!"

"I see!" said the miller. "You are a sick man searching for health."

"Ah, I should find it if I lived near you!"

"I would give it you with all my heart, if you would promise not to give me your disease. And to begin, speak to me reasonably: tell me that whatever be Mme. Marcelle's position, you will marry her if she consent."

"You recall my anguish. You told me that she had nothing; you have seemed to bethink yourself since, and give me to understand that she is still rich."

"Come, then, here is the truth — it was a trial of you. The three hundred thousand francs still remain, and let Father Bricolin do his best, I will advise her so well that she shall keep them. With three hundred thousand francs, comrade, I hope you may do some good, since I propose to save the world with fifty thousand that I have not!"

"I admire and envy your gayety," said Lemor, overpowered; "but you plunge the dagger again to my heart. I adore this woman, this angel, and I cannot be the husband of a rich wife! Upon the subject of honor the world has prejudices which I have entertained in spite of myself, and cannot shake off. I could not look upon her fortune as mine; she owes it to her son, and will doubtless preserve it for him. Thus I could not think of making myself useful by my riches, without failing in what is considered probity. And then I should have certain scruples about condemning to indigence a woman for whom I feel an infinite tenderness, and a child whose future independence I respect. I should suffer in their privations, and shudder every hour lest they should suc cumb before too hard a life. Alas! this child and this woman do not belong to the same race that we do, Grand-Louis. They are the dethroned masters of the world, who would demand from their former slaves the luxuries and attentions to which they are accustomed. We should see them faint and fail beneath our thatched roofs. Their feeble hands would be bruised by labor, and it may be that our love could not sustain them to the end of a struggle which is already crushing ourselves —"

"Here is your malady coming on again, and faith deserting you," interrupted Grand-Louis. "You lose belief even in love; you do not see that *she* would bear all for you, and be happy in so doing? You are not worthy to be so greatly loved, that is a fact!"

"Ah, my friend, let her become poor, absolutely poor, if only I have nothing to do with making her so, and you shall see if I lack courage to sustain her!"

"Well! then you will labor to earn a little money, as we all do. Why so despise the money that she has, which is earned already?"

"It was not earned by the labor of the poor. It is stolen money."

"How so?"

"It is the heritage of the feudal rapine of her ancestors. Their castles were strengthened, and their lands fattened, by the blood and the sweat of the people."

"True enough, that! but money does not keep that sort of rust. It has the gift of being pure or unclean, according to the hand that holds it."

"No!" said Lemor, with fire. "Some money is soiled, and it soils the hand that receives it."

"That is a metaphor!" said the miller, quietly. "It is all the while the money of the poor, since it has been extorted from them by pillage, violence, and tyranny. Must the poor abstain from taking it again because robbers have long handled it? Come, let us go to bed, my dear fellow, you are unreasonable; you shall not go to Blanchemont. I am less than ever for having you go, since you have nothing but nonsense to say to my dear lady; but, by my faith! you shall not leave me till you renounce your — what is the word now? — your utopics. Shall it be so?"

"Perhaps," said Lemor, sad and thoughtful, and drawn by his love to submit to the ascendancy of his new friend.

CHAPTER XIX.

A PORTRAIT.

WE do not know whether a minute description of the features and costume of the characters in a novel is in strict conformity to the rules of art. Perhaps the story-tellers of our time (and we among the first) have somewhat abused the fashion of portraits in their narratives. Nevertheless, it is an old custom, and while we hope that future masters, in condemning our details, will sketch their own figures in broader and clearer outlines, we do not feel our hand strong enough to quit the beaten route, and we will now repair our previous forgetfulness by drawing the portrait of one of our heroines.

Would it not, indeed, seem that something essential was wanting to the interest of a love story, however veracious, if one was ignorant whether the heroine were gifted with a more or less remarkable beauty? It is not even enough to say, "She is beautiful." However little we may have been struck by her adventures, or the peculiarity of her situation, we want to know whether she is dark or fair, tall or short, languid or animated, elegant or simple in her appearance; if we heard that she were passing in the street, we should run to the windows to see her, and according to the impression made upon us by her countenance, we should be disposed to love her, or forgive her for having drawn public attention upon herself.

Such was doubtless Rose Bricolin's opinion. It was the morning of the first night that she had shared her chamber with Madame de Blanchemont, and still indolently recumbent on her pillow, while the more active and *matinal* young widow was already completing her toilet, Rose examined her attentively, and asked herself whether this Parisian beauty would eclipse her own at the village fête which was to take place the next day.

Marcelle de Blanchemont was less in height than she appeared, thanks to the elegance of her proportions and the dignity of all her attitudes. We must confess that she was a blonde. but not an insipid blonde, neither was she of that ashen fairness so much over-praised, which almost always deprives the face of vitality, because it usually betokens a powerless organization. She was a warm, living, golden blonde, and her hair was one of her chief beauties. In her childhood she had been wonderfully beautiful, and at the convent they called her the cherub; at eighteen she was only a very pleasing person, but at twenty-two she was such that she had unconsciously inspired love in more than one. Yet her features were not remarkably perfect, and their freshness was often lessened by a slightly feverish animation. The activity of an ardent spirit was shown by the dark shade around her brilliant blue eyes. Her varying color, her clear and open look, and the light down at the corners of her mouth, were so many certain indications of an energetic will and a devoted, disinterested, courageous character. At first sight she pleased without dazzling; afterwards she dazzled more and more, without ceasing to please; and they who scarcely thought her pretty at the first meeting, were soon unable to disengage their eyes or thoughts from her.

Love had wrought a second transformation in her. Busy and cheerful at the convent, she was never pensive or melancholy before she met Lemor; and even since she loved him, she was still prompt and decided even in the smallest things. But a deep attachment, by directing all the strength of her will towards one single aim, had given a firmer cast to her features, and a new and mysterious charm to all her manners. No one knew that she loved; every one felt that she was capable of passionate affection, and no man approached her without desiring to inspire her either with love or friendship. There had been a time when women, jealous of her on account of this powerful attraction, had accused her of coquetry, but never was reproach less deserved. Marcelle had no time to lose in so childish and indelicate an amusement. She never even thought of it; and when she suddenly retired from society, she had not to reproach herself with having wilfully marked her passage through it with scars.

Rose Bricolin, undeniably more beautiful, but whose childlike emotions were less mysterious to trace and divine, had heard the young baroness of Blanchemont mentioned as one of the beauties of the Parisian world, and she could not easily comprehend how this delicate blonde, so simply dressed, and with such natural manners, could have acquired such a reputation. Rose did not know that in highly civilized, and consequently highly *blasé* society, animation from within lends a magic charm to a woman's exterior, which always effaces the classic majesty of colder beauty. Still Rose felt that she already loved Marcelle fondly; she could not yet account to herself for the attraction exerted by her bright, frank look, the winning tones of her voice, her quick and kindly smile, and the decided and generous tone of her whole being. "She is not as handsome as I thought!" mused she; "how is it, then, that I wish to be like her?" Rose, in fact, caught herself dressing her hair as she did, involuntarily imitating her walk, her quick and graceful way of turning her head, and even the inflexions of her voice. She succeeded so well as to lose in a few days some of her remaining rustic awkwardness, which, however, had not been without its charm; but it may be truly said that this new vivacity was rather inspired than borrowed, and that she had soon made it so entirely her own as much to enhance her natural gifts. Neither was Rose destitute of courage and frankness; Marcelle was rather destined to develop her true character, which had been stifled by outward circumstances, than to suggest to her a new one purely imitative and factitious.

CHAPTER XX.

LOVE AND MONEY.

WHILE moving about the chamber, Marcelle heard a strange voice in the next room, deep, and yet shrill as an old woman's. It seemed to be strained from cavernous lungs, which could neither release nor contain it, and frequently repeated:

"For they took all from me — everything, even my clothes!"

And a firmer voice, recognizable for that of the grandmother, replied:

"Be quiet now, my master.* I was not talking to you of that."

Seeing her companion's astonishment, Rose undertook to explain this dialogue to her. "There has always been misfortune in our house," said she, "and even before my poor sister or I were born, there was ill-luck in the family. You saw my grandfather, who looks so very old? It is he whom you heard just now. He seldom speaks, but he is so deaf, that when he does, you can hear him all over the house. He almost always repeats nearly the same thing, 'They have taken all from me, pillaged all, stolen all!' He never goes beyond that, and if my grandmother, who has great control over him, had not made him keep still, he would have said it as a greeting to you yesterday."

"And what does it mean?" asked Marcelle.

"Can it be that you have not heard of that story?" said Rose. "It made enough noise, nevertheless; but it is true that you have never been in this part of the country, and that you have never minded what might be going on here. I will warrant that you do not know that for more than fifty years the Bricolins have been the farmers of Blanchemont?"

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* In speaking of their husbands, aged women in the country still follow the old custom of saying *my master*. In our generation they say *my man*.

"I knew that, and even that your grandfather, before settling here, held a considerable farm at Blanc, belonging to my grandfather."

"Ah, well! if so, you have heard of the story of the *chauffeurs?*"

"Yes, but longer ago than I can remember, for it was an old story when I was but a child."

"It happened more than forty years ago, as far as I know myself, for we do not willingly talk of it here. It is too shocking and too fearful. My lord, your grandfather, at the time of the troubles, intrusted to my grandpapa Bricolin the sum of fifty thousand francs in gold, desiring him to hide it in some of the old castle walls, while he lay concealed in Paris, where he escaped being denounced. You know that better than I. Now, then, my grandpapa had this gold secreted with his own in the old castle of Beaufort, where he was farmer, twenty leagues from here. I have never been there. Your grandfather was in no haste to reclaim his deposit from him, and unfortunately, in writing him a letter to that effect, took a scoundrel of a notary into his confidence. The night following the chauffeurs came, and subjected my poor grandfather to a thousand tortures, till he told where the money was hidden. They carried off all, both his and yours, and even my grandmother's house-linen and wedding jewels. My father, who was then a child, was bound and thrown on a bed. He saw it all, and nearly died with fright. My grandmother was shut up in the cellar. The working-men also were beaten and tied, and pistols were held to their throats to hinder them from crying out. At last, when the robbers had laid hands on all that they could carry away, they withdrew without any great mystery, and remained unpunished, nobody knows why. And from that trouble my poor grandpapa, who was then young, became suddenly old.

He has never recovered his mind, his brain is weakened, he has lost the memory of almost everything, save this dreadful business, and he never opens his mouth without alluding to it. Always, since that night, he has trembled as you see; and his legs, which were withered by the fire, have continued so slender and weak that he has never been able to work since. Your grandfather, who was a worthy lord, by what is said of him, never reclaimed his money, and even granted all the rents which he had not taken up for five years to my grandmother, who then, by her courage and clear head, had become the man of the family. This restored our affairs; and when my father was old enough to take the farm of Blanchemont, he had already some credit. This is our history; joined to that of my poor sister, you see that it is not very cheerful."

Marcelle was much impressed by this recital, and the Bricolin home appeared still more gloomy to her than the day before. These people, in the midst of their prosperity, seemed doomed to something tragic and disastrous. Between the maniac and the idiot, Mme. de Blanchemont felt struck with instinctive terror and deep melancholy. She was amazed that the careless and luxuriant beauty of Rose could have been developed in such an atmosphere of catastrophes and violent contests, in which money had borne so fatal a part.

Seven rang from the cuckoo-clock, affectionately preserved by Mother Bricolin in her chamber, which was lumbered up with all the old rustic furniture cast aside in the rearrangement of the new chateau, and was contiguous to that occupied by Rose and Marcelle, when the small Fanchon came joyfully to announce that her *master* had just come.

"She means Grand-Louis," said Rose. "But why must she needs proclaim it as great news to us?"

And notwithstanding her little scornful tone, Rose became crimson as the fullest blown of the flowers whose name she proudly bore.

"But he is full of business, and asked to speak with you," said Fanchon, disconcerted.

"With me?" said Rose, shrugging her shoulders, but blushing more and more.

"No, with Madame Marcelle," said the girl.

Marcelle went toward the door which Fanchon was holding wide open as possible, but was obliged to draw back for the entrance of a farm-boy carrying a trunk, and of Grand-Louis, himself carrying one still heavier, which he placed on the floor with much ease.

"All your errands are done," said he, laying also a bag of money on the bureau.

Then, without waiting for Marcelle's thanks, he cast his eyes upon Edward, who, beautiful as an angel, lay asleep in the bed his mother had left. Drawn by his love for children, and especially for this one, who was irresistibly charming, Grand-Louis approached the bed to see him nearer, and Edward, opening his eyes, stretched out his arms to him, calling him by the name of *alochon*, which he persisted in giving him.

"See how well he looks already, since he has come to our country!" said the miller, taking one of the little hands to kiss. But there was a sudden movement of the curtains behind him, and turning, Grand-Louis saw the pretty arm of Rose, who, thoroughly vexed and ashamed at this invasion of her apartment, closed her embroidered hangings with a loud noise. Grand-Louis, who did not know that Rose had shared her chamber with Marcelle, and did not expect to find her there, stood confounded, repentant, ashamed, and yet unable to take his eyes from the white hand so awkwardly holding the curtain fringes.

Marcelle then perceived the impropriety that she had permitted, and reproached herself with the aristocratic habits by which she had unconsciously been governed at the moment. Accustomed to consider a porter as in no respect a man, she had not thought of protecting Rose's apartment against the miller, and the boy who brought her baggage. Ashamed and repentant in her turn, she was about to tell Grand-Louis, who seemed petrified in his place, to withdraw with all speed, when Mme. Bricolin appeared bristling at the chamber door, and stood mute with horror at seeing the miller, her mortal foe, standing, distressed, between the two beds of the young ladies.

She said not a word, and went out hastily, like one who finds a thief in the house, and runs to call the police. She ran, in fact, to find M. Bricolin, who was in the kitchen taking his third morning draught, each being a pint of white wine.

"M. Bricolin!" said she, in a choked voice, "come quick! quick! dost thou hear?"

"What is to pay now?" said the farmer, not liking to be disturbed in what he called his *refreshment.* "Is the house on fire?"

"Come, I tell thee, and see what is going on!" answered his wife, almost speechless with anger.

"Ah! faith! if there is anything to fret about," said Bricolin, accustomed to his moiety's temper, "thou canst manage it very well without me. I am easy about it."

Seeing that he did not stir, Mme. Bricolin came up to him, and swallowing with an effort, for she was actually strangling with rage:

"Wilt thou stir?" said she, at last, but cautiously, that she might not be heard by the servants; "I tell thee that thy clod-hopper of a miller is in Rose's chamber, while Rose is still in bed."

"Ah! so, that is improper, very improper," said M. Bricolin, rising, "and I will give him a piece of my mind. But no noise, wife, dost thou hear? on account of the child!"

"Go along, and make no noise thyself! Ah! I hope thou wilt believe me now, and wilt treat him like an unmannerly, impudent fellow as he is!"

Just as M. Bricolin was leaving the kitchen, he came full upon Grand-Louis.

"By my faith, M. Bricolin," said he, with an irresistibly candid manner, "you see a man shocked at the stupidity he has just been guilty of."

And he simply related the facts.

"Thou seest that he did not do it on purpose?" said M. Bricolin, turning to his wife.

"And is that the way thou takest things?" cried the dame, giving free course to her fury. Then rushing to both the doors, and slamming them, she came back between the miller and M. Bricolin, who was already offering some *refreshment* to the culprit. "No, M. Bricolin," screamed she, "I cannot comprehend thy imbecility! Thou dost not see that this good-for-nothing fellow treats our daughter in a way not suitable for people like him, and which we cannot longer endure? Then I must let him know myself, and tell him —"

"Tell nothing yet, Mme. Bricolin," said the farmer, raising his voice in his turn, "and give me a little chance at my business as head of the family. Ah! to hear thee, I know I might fasten my breeches with pins, and thou shouldst put suspenders to thy petticoat! Come, come, don't make a din in my ears so early. I know what I have to say to this boy, and I wish nobody else to meddle with it. Come, wife, tell Chounette to bring us a fresh stoup of wine, and go tend thy chickens."

Mme. Bricolin would have answered. Her husband took a great crab-tree stick which always stood by his chair while he drank, and began to beat time on the table with all his might, and the tremendous din so completely drowned her voice, that she was forced to retreat, which she did, banging the door after her.

"What would you be pleased to want, master?" said Chounette, running in at the noise.

M. Bricolin took the empty flagon and handed it majestically to her, rolling his eyes the while in a terrific manner. The fat Chounette became lighter than a bird to execute the orders of the potentate of Blanchemont.

"My poor Grand-Louis," said the great man when they were alone, with the wine stoup between their glasses, "thou must know that my wife is angered with thee; she bears thee a mortal grudge, and, but for me, she would have turned thee out of the house. But we are old friends, we need one another, and we will not quarrel. Thou wilt tell me the truth. I am sure that my wife is mistaken. But what wouldst thou have? all women are fools or mad. Let us see, now, canst thou lay thy hand on thy heart and answer me?"

"Speak! speak!" said Grand-Louis in a tone which sounded like reckless promise, and making a strong effort to compose his face to an air of ease and indifference, very remote from his real feelings at the moment.

"Well, then! I will not beat about the bush," said the farmer. "Art thou or art thou not in love with my daughter?"

"What an odd question!" answered the miller, brazening it out. "What would you have me answer? If I say yes, it looks like defying you; if I say no, it looks like rudeness to Mlle. Rose, for indeed she deserves that I should be in love with her, as you deserve that I should pay you respect."

"Thou art merry! that is a good sign. I see that thou art not in love."

"Stay, stay!" returned Grand-Louis. "I did not say that. I say, on the contrary, that every one is of necessity in love with her, because she is beautiful as the morning; because she is your image; because, in short, all who look upon her, old or young, rich or poor, feel something for her, without well knowing whether it be the pleasure of loving her or the mortification of not being able to feel free to do so."

"He has wit enough for thirty thousand!" said the farmer, falling back in his chair with a laugh which nearly broke his well-filled waistcoat. "Thunder crush me if I do not wish thou wert worth one hundred thousand crowns! I would give thee my daughter in preference to any other!"

"I believe so! but as I have them not, you would not think of giving her to me, would you?"

"No, thunder smash me! but after all, I am sorry for it, and that shows thee my friendship."

"Many thanks — you are too kind!"

"Ah! thou seest my jade of a wife has taken it into her head that thou talkest of it to Rose!"

"Me!" said the miller, and this time with the accent of truth, "I have never said a word to her that you might not have heard."

"I am sure of it. Thou hast too much sense not to see that thou canst not think of my daughter, and that I cannot give her to a man like thee. Not that I despise thee, fie! I am not proud, and I know that all men are equal in the sight of the law. I have not forgotten that I come from a peasant family, and that when my father began his fortune, which he so unhappily lost, as thou knowest, he was no greater a gentleman than thou, for he, too, was a miller! but in *these days of ours*, old fellow, money does everything, as they say, and since I have some, and thou none, we cannot deal together."

"That is conclusive and peremptory," said the miller, with bitter gayety. "It is just, reasonable, veritable, equitable, and salutary, as the curate says in his preface."

"The deuce! hear now, Grand-Louis, everybody does just so. Thou who art rich for a peasant, thou wouldst not marry little Fanchon, the maid, if she were to take a fancy to thee?"

"No; but if I took a fancy to her, it would make a difference."

"Dost thou mean by that, thou great rogue, that my daughter might have one for thee?"

"When did I say such a thing?"

"I do not say thou didst, though my wife insists that thou art capable of speaking too freely if thou art permitted such familiarity at our house."

"Come now, M. Bricolin," said Grand-Louis, beginning to lose patience, and finding his actual sentence cruel enough without the addition of insult, "are you saying all this to me for the last five minutes in fun, for a joke, or are you talking seriously? I have not asked you for your daughter, and I do not see why you should take the pains to refuse her to me. I am not the man to speak of her without respect, and I do not see why you should report to me Mme. Bricolin's disagreeable sayings about me. If you mean to tell me to go, I am all ready. If it is to withdraw your custom, I have no objection, I have enough more. But speak out, and let us act like honest people, for I confess to you that all this looks to me like seeking an ugly quarrel with me, as if some people here wanted to put me in the wrong to cover their own fault."

So speaking, Grand-Louis rose, and made as if he would depart. It was neither M. Bricolin's desire nor interest to quarrel with him.

"What art thou talking about, great simpleton?" replied he in a friendly tone, forcing him to reseat himself. "Art thou mad? What fly hath stung thee? Was I speaking seriously? Or do I mind my wife's nonsense? As a general rule, a wasp buzzing in your ear, and a teasing, contradictious woman, are about the same thing. Let us finish our flagon, and remain friends, credit me, Grand-Louis. My custom is a good one, and I congratulate myself on having given it to thee. There are many little services we can mutually render one another, and it would be very stupid to quarrel for nothing. I know that thou art a bright, sensible lad, and canst not talk foolishly to my daughter. Besides, I think too well of her not to suppose that she would know how to answer thee if thou wert to fail in respect. So —"

"So, so!" said Grand-Louis, striking his glass on the table with an emphatic impulse of anger, "the long and short of it is, that all your reasons are needless, M. Bricolin, and grow tiresome to me. The devil take your custom, your little services, and my interests, if I must hear it even supposed that I could be wanting in respect to your daughter, and that some day or other she should have to remind me of my place. I am only a peasant, but I am as proud as you, M. Bricolin, with your good leave; and if you can find no more delicate mode of expressing yourself toward me, let me bid you good-day and go about my business."

M. Bricolin had much trouble in calming Grand-Louis, who was deeply irritated, not at the suspicions of the farmer's wife, which he knew were in a certain degree merited, nor at Bricolin's coarse manner, to which he was well accustomed, but at the cruelty with which the latter unconsciously tore open his heart's bleeding wounds.

He was at length appeased by an *amende honorable* from the farmer, who had his reasons for showing himself very peaceable, and for not attending to his wife's fears, at least for the moment.

"So, then!" said he, inviting him to begin upon a new flagon of his white wine, after the cheese, "thou art great friends with our young lady?"

"Great friends!" replied the miller with some remaining vexation, and declining to drink, notwithstanding the urgency of his host; "that is as reasonable as the love of which you forbid me to speak to your daughter!"

"Faith! if the phrase is unsuitable, it is none of my invention; she herself said several times yesterday (which made Thibaude furious!), that she had a great friendship for thee. Lord! Grand-Louis, everybody knows thou art a handsome fellow, and they say that great ladies — What! art thou going to storm again?"

"My opinion is that you have a stoup too much in your head this morning, M. Bricolin!" said the miller, pale with indignation.

Never had he been so much disgusted with Bricolin's hard vulgarity, which heretofore he had taken as a matter of course.

"And I believe," returned the former, "that thou hast turned thy mill race into thy stomach this morning, for thou art as dull and captious as a water-drinker. Is there no fun to be had with thee just now? That is something new. Well then, let us talk seriously, if thou wilt. It is certain that, in one way or another, thou hast acquired the esteem and confidence of the lady, and that she commissions thee with her errands without speaking of it to anybody."

"I do not know what you mean."

"Why, thou goest to * * * for her, thou bringest her her baggage and her money! — for Chounette saw thee give her a large bag of money! In short, thou seest to her affairs."

"As you will. I know that I attend to mine, and that, on the same occasion, I brought her trunks and purse from the inn where she left them; if that is to see to her affairs, well and good, I am content — "

"Then what was in the bag? Gold or silver?"

"How should I know! I did not look in it."

"It would have cost thee nothing, and done her no harm."

"You ought to have told me that you were interested in it; I did not guess it!"

"Listen, Grand-Louis, my lad! Be frank! This lady has talked with thee about her business?"

"Where do you learn that?"

"I learn it *there!*" said the farmer, pointing with his forefinger to his narrow and sunburned forehead. "I smell an odor of secrecies and concealments in the air. The lady seems to distrust me and consult thee!"

"And if she did?" replied Grand-Louis, looking fixedly at Bricolin, with some intention of braving him.

"If it were so, Grand-Louis, I do not think thou wouldst be unfavorable to me?"

"How do you understand that?"

"As thou very well understandest it thyself. I have always placed confidence in thee, and thou wouldst not abuse it. Thou knowest that I have a desire for the estate, and that I do not wish to pay too dear for it?"

"I know that you do not wish to pay her price."

"Her price! her price! that depends on the position of the parties. What would be ill sold for another, will be happily sold for *her*, for she had best get quickly out of the trough in which her husband has left her."

"I know that, Monsieur Bricolin, I have your notions about it, and your ambition, all at my fingers' ends. You wish to beat down the *dame venderesse*, as the lawyers would say, by fifty thousand francs."

"No, not beat her down at all! I have been fair and above board with her. I told her what her property was worth. Only, I told her that I would not pay all its value, and ten thousand million thunders crush me if I will, or can offer a farthing more."

"You spoke differently to me, not so very long ago! You told me that you could pay her price, and that if it were absolutely necessary to go beyond — "

"Thou ravest! I never said so!"

"Pardon me! just remember! It was at the Cluis Fair, by token that M. Gronard, the mayor, was there."

"He cannot testify, he is dead!"

"But I, I could swear to it!"

"Thou wilt not do it?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On you."

"How so?"

"The treatment that I receive in your house will regulate my conduct, M. Bricolin. I am tired of your dame's rudeness, and of the affronts she puts upon me. I know that more are in reserve, that your daughter is forbidden to speak to me, to dance with me, to come to my mill to see her nurse, and I have all sorts of vexations of which I would not complain if I had deserved them, but which are insulting, as I have not."

"How, is that all, Grand-Louis? and a pretty present, a note of five hundred francs, for instance, would not be more agreeable to thee?"

"No, sir!" dryly answered the miller.

"Thou art a simpleton, my lad; five hundred francs in an honest man's pocket is worth more than a *bourrée* in the dust. Thou makest a point, then, of dancing with my daughter?"

"It concerns my honor, M. Bricolin. I have always danced the bourrée with her before everybody. No one thought it amiss, and if I should now receive the affront of a refusal from her, everybody would think your wife's stories about my rudeness and ill manners true. I will not be so treated. It is for you to decide whether you choose to provoke me or no."

"Dance with Rose, my boy, dance away!" cried the farmer with joy, mingled with deep roguery; "dance as much as thou wilt! if it needs but that to please thee!"

"Well, we shall see," thought the miller, satisfied with his revenge. "The lady of Blanchemont is coming this way," said he. "Your wife, with her uproar, gave me no time to render account of my errands to her. If she speaks to me of her affairs, I will tell you her intentions."

"I leave thee with her," said M. Bricolin, rising. "Do not forget that thou canst influence her intentions! Business annoys her, and she is in haste to conclude it. Make her understand that I am immovable — I will go to Thibaude, and lesson her in what concerns thee."

"Double rascal!" said Grand-Louis to himself, as the farmer heavily hastened away. "Reckoning on me for an accomplice! Oh ho! just for having thought me capable of it, I hope it may cost thee fifty thousand francs and twenty thousand to boot!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MILL-BOY.

MY dear lady," said the miller hastily, as he heard Rose following Marcelle, "I have a hundred things to say to you, but I cannot say them all in a minute! Here, besides (I do not speak of Mlle. Rose), the walls have very long ears, and if I go to walk alone with you, that will raise suspicion upon certain affairs — In short, I must speak with you; how can it be done?"

"There is a very simple way," answered Mme. de Blanchemont. "I will go to walk to-day, and I can easily find the way to Angibault."

"Besides, if Mademoiselle Rose would show it to you," said Grand-Louis, at the moment that Rose entered, and heard Marcelle's last words — "If so be," he added, "that she is not too angry with me — "

"Oh! you great blunderer! you have earned me a fine scolding from my mother!" replied Rose. "She has said nothing to me yet, but with her what is delayed is not lost."

"No, Mademoiselle Rose; no, fear nothing. Your mamma will not say a word this time, thank heaven! I have justified myself; your papa has forgiven me, and undertaken to pacify Mme. Bricolin; and provided that you bear me no grudge for my stupidity — "

"Do not let us speak of that," said Rose, blushing. "I am not angry with you, Grand-Louis. Only you need not have shouted your explanation so loud as you went out. *You waked me in a fright.*"

"You were asleep, then? I did not think so."

"Come, you were not asleep, little cheat," said Marcelle, "for you drew your curtains furiously."

"I was half asleep," said Rose, trying to hide her embarrassment under an air of vexation.

"The plainest thing about it," said the miller, with honest distress, "is, that she is angry with me."

"No, Louis, I pardon thee, since thou didst not know I was there," said Rose, who had been too long in the habit of saying thee and thou to Grand-Louis, her old playmate, not to relapse into it, either through forgetfulness or of purpose. She well knew that a single word from her lips, accompanied by this delicious *thou*, would change all the melancholy of her lover into overflowing joy.

"And yet," said the miller, whose eyes shone with pleasure, "you will not come to the mill to-day with Mme. Marcelle?"

"How can I, Grand-Louis, when mamma has forbidden me — I know not why?"

"Your papa will permit you. I complained to him of Mme. Bricolin's harshness; he disapproves it, and has promised me to remove the prejudices she has against me — I do not know why, either."

"Ah! so much the better, if that is the case," cried Rose, openly; "we will go on horseback, will we not, Madame Marcelle? You shall ride my little mare, and I will take papa's nag; he is very gentle, and goes very quick, too."

"And me," said Edward; "I want to ride on a horse too."

"That is more difficult," replied Marcelle. "I should not dare to take thee behind me, my darling."

"Nor I neither," said Rose; "our horses are rather too lively."

"Oh! I want to go to Angibault too!" cried the child. "Mamma, take me to the mill!"

"It is too far for your little legs," said the miller; "but I will take charge of you, if your mamma is willing. We will go first in my cart, and we will go and see the cows milked, so that these ladies may find cream when they come."

"You may safely trust him with him," said Rose to

Marcelle. "He is so good with children! I know something of that myself."

"Oh, you! you were so pretty!" said the miller, quite melted; "you should always have stayed as you were then."

"Much obliged for the compliment, Grand-Louis!"

"I do not mean that you are no longer pretty, but that you should never have grown up. You loved me so well in those days! You could not leave me — always hanging round my neck!"

"That would have been a pleasant habit to preserve!" said Rose, half annoyed, half amused.

"Well," resumed the miller, turning to Marcelle, "then may I take the little one?"

"I trust him to you with entire security," said Mme. de Blanchemont, giving her boy into his arms.

"Ah! how good!" cried the child. "Alochon, thou wilt hold me up in thy arms, and let me pick the black plums from the trees along the road?"

"Yes, my lord," said the miller, laughing, "if you will promise not to let them fall upon my nose."

Grand-Louis was approaching his mill, jogging on, and playing in his cart with Edward, who made his heart throb by recalling to him the childish charms, caresses, and freaks of Rose, when he spied Henri Lemor coming to meet him through the meadow. The latter, however, on recognizing Edward beside the miller, turned instantly, and rushed into the house to conceal himself.

"Take Sophie to the field," said Grand-Louis to his mill-boy, stopping at some distance from the door. "And you, mother, amuse this child for me. Keep him like the apple of your eye; as for me, I have a word to say at the mill."

He then hurried to Lemor, who had shut himself up in his chamber, and who opened the door cautiously, saying: "This child knows me. I was obliged to keep out of his sight."

"And who the devil could have guessed you were still here?" said the miller, scarcely able to recover from his surprise. "I bade you farewell this morning, and thought you already setting sail for Africa! What wandering knight, or troubled spirit, are you, then?"

"I am indeed a troubled spirit, my friend. Have compassion on me. I went a league; I sat down on the brink of a fountain; I dreamed, I wept, and I returned. I cannot go!"

"Come, now, that makes me love you!" cried the miller, heartily shaking his hand. "That is the way I have been more than an hundred times. Yes, more than an hundred times I have left Blanchemont, swearing that I would never set foot there again, and there was always some fountain by the way, where I sat down to weep, and which had the virtue of sending me back whence I came. But hearken, my lad, you must be on your guard! I am glad to have you stay with us as long as you cannot decide to be off. I foresee that it will be some time. All the better — I like you; I wanted to keep you this morning; you return — I am glad of it, and thank you. But you must go away for a few hours. *They* are coming here."

"Both?" cried Lemor, understanding Grand-Louis at half a word.

"Yes, both. I have not been able to say a word about you to Mme. de Blanchemont. She is coming to give me an opportunity to speak to her of her business affairs, not knowing that I have heart affairs, too, to speak of. I do not wish that she should know you are here, till I am quite sure she will not scold me for having brought you. Besides, I do not wish to surprise her, especially before Rose, who doubtless knows nothing of all this. So hide yourself. They asked for their horses as I came away. They will have breakfasted as fair ladies breakfast, that is, like linnets; their beasts are not slow-limbed; they may be here at any moment."

"I go — I fly!" said Lemor, all pale and trembling; "ah! my friend, she will be here!"

"I understand! your heart bleeds not to see her! It is hard, I confess! If one could be sure of you — if you could swear not to show yourself, not to stir hand or foot all the while they are here — I could secrete you in a place where you could see her without being observed."

"Oh! dear Grand-Louis, my excellent friend, I promise! I swear! Hide me, were it beneath your millstone!"

"The deuce! that would hardly do! Grand'-Louise's bones are harder than yours. I will stow you more softly. You shall climb into my hay-loft, and through the hole in the skylight you can see the ladies pass to and fro. I am not sorry to have you see Rose Bricolin — you shall tell me if you have known many prettier duchesses at Paris. But stay till I go and see what is going on."

Grand-Louis went to a spot at a little distance which commanded a view of the towers of Blanchemont, and of nearly all the road leading there, and when assured that the two equestrians were not yet in sight, he returned to his prisoner.

"Now, comrade," said he, "here is a sixpenny looking-glass and a real miller's razor, and you will please part with that goat's beard of yours. It is out of place in a mill. It is a mere flour-nest. And then, if you should unluckily show the end of your nose, the change would make it less easy to recognize you."

"You are right," replied Lemor, "and I hasten to obey."

"Do you know," resumed the miller, "that I have an idea in making you shear that black fleece?"

"What?"

"I have just thought of it, and this is what I have decided: you shall stay with me till you have determined to cause no more pain to my dear lady, and to change your foolish notions about fortune. Even if you should stay only a few days, no one need know who you are, and your beard gives you a city look, which draws attention. I told my good mother at random last night that you were a surveyor. It was the first lie that occurred to me, and it was nonsense. However, she never wonders, and will think it very natural that you should have left surveying for mechanics. So you shall be a miller, my dear fellow; that suits you better. You will busy yourself, or pretend to busy yourself, with the mill. You certainly know something about part of it, and you will be considered as advising me about setting a new millstone. You will be a useful person whom I met in town. In this way, nobody will be astonished at your presence here. I am clerk; I answer for you; no one will ask to see your passport. The *garde-champêtre* is rather inquisitive and prating. But a pint or two of wine silences his tongue. This is my plan. You must conform to it, or I abandon you."

"I submit, I will be your mill-boy, I will hide myself, provided I do not go without seeing her again, were it only from here and for an instant — "

"Hush! I hear iron on the flints — *tric tric*, that is Mlle. Rose's black mare — *trac trac*, that is M. Bricolin's gray nag. You have shaved enough, washed enough, and I assure you you look an hundred times better for it. Run to the loft and turn the shutter of the skylight upon yourself. You can look through the crack. If my boy comes up, make believe sleep. The country people often give themselves the easement of a siesta in the hay, and it seems to them a more Christian occupation than solitary reflection with arms folded and eyes open. Adieu! there is Mlle. Rose. See, the foremost one! See how lightly she trots, and with such a decided air!"

"Beautiful as an angel!" said Lemor, who had looked only at Marcelle.

CHAPTER XXII.

BY THE WATER-SIDE.

GRAND-LOUIS, who was full of the thoughtful attentions inspired by true affection, had given orders, in passing, that the collation of milk and fruit should be served under a trellis in front of his door, just opposite and very near the mill, whence Lemor, crouched in his loft, could see and even hear Marcelle.

The rustic repast was very merry, thanks to Edward's frolicsome familiarity with the miller, and Rose's charming coquetry towards him. "Take care, Rose!" whispered Mme. de Blanchemont to the young girl. "You are making yourself enchanting to-day, and you must see that you are turning his head. It seems to me either that you make light of my lectures, or that you are going too far."

Rose was disturbed, remained a moment thoughtful, but soon renewed her lively enticements, as if internally resolved to accept the love she provoked. There had always been at the bottom of her heart a strong friendship for Grand-Louis, which made it very improbable that she would amuse herself by laughing at him, unless she felt the secret possibility of a great advance in this fraternal affection. The miller, without wishing to flatter himself, still felt an instinctive confidence in her, and his loyal soul told him that she was too good and pure coldly to torture him.

Thus he was happy in seeing her so cheerful and animated at his side, and it was with regret that he left her with his mother, the last at table. But he had seen Marcelle slip away and make him a private signal to follow her to the other side of the river.

"Well, dear Grand-Louis," said Mme. de Blanchemont, "it seems to me that you are no longer so sad as you were the other day, and that I have guessed the reason!"

"Ah! Mme. Marcelle, you know all, I see plainly, and have nothing to learn from me. It is you, rather, who can tell me more than I know; for it appears to me that great confidence should be and is placed in you."

"I will not compromise Rose," said Mme. de Blanchemont, smiling. "Women ought not to betray one another. Still, I think I may hope, with you, that you will not find it impossible to make yourself beloved."

"Ah! if I were loved, I should be satisfied, and I think I should ask no more; for the day that she told me so, I should be ready to die with joy!"

"My friend, your love is noble and sincere, and for that reason you must not too much desire to have it returned before thinking how to remove the obstacles on the part of the family. I presume it is that of which you wished to talk with me, and that is why I eagerly accepted your invitation. Let us see — time is precious; they will doubtless soon join us — How can I influence her father's mind, as Rose gave me to understand that I might?"

"Rose gave you to understand that?" cried the miller, with transport. "Then she thinks of it? She loves me? Ah! Mme. Marcelle! And you did not tell me that at once! Ah! What care I for the rest, if she loves me, if she desires to marry me!"

"Softly, my friend. Rose has not gone so far. She has a sisterly affection for you, she desired the revocation of the sentence which prohibited her from speaking to you, or coming to your house, or treating you, in short, as a friend, as she has always done till now. This is why she has begged me to stand your friend with her parents, and to take your part, while showing some firmness in my dealings with them. And this beside, I have understood, Grand-Louis; M. Bricolin wants my estate cheap, and it might be that if Rose loved you, I could insure her happiness and yours by imposing your marriage as a condition of my consent. If you think so, do not doubt that I shall be very glad to make the slight sacrifice."

"Slight sacrifice! You do not consider it, Mme. Marcelle! you think yourself still rich; you talk of fifty thousand francs as of nothing. You forget that it is henceforth a good part of your living. And do you believe I would accept such a sacrifice? Oh! I had rather renounce Rose at once."

"You do not comprehend the true value of money, my friend: it is only a means of happiness; and the happiness one can procure for others is the purest and most certain that one can procure for one's self."

"You are good as God, poor lady! but there is in this case a happiness still purer, and more certain than your own. It is that which you must provide for your son. And what would you say if some day — great God! — for want of the fifty thousand francs you had sacrificed for your friends, your dear Edward were forced in his turn to renounce a woman whom he loved, and whose hand you could not obtain for him?"

"Your arguments are good, and touch my heart; but on the subject of worldly interests we can make no absolute calculations for the future. My situation is not so rigidly defined as you make it; by persisting in selling at a high price I shall lose time, and you know each day of hesitation precipitates my ruin. By closing the bargain quickly I free myself from these gnawing debts, and certainly I may some day find it clear profit to have taken my course without puerile regret or misplaced parsimony. Thus you see that I am not so very generous, and that I act for my own interest while serving your love."

"A poor head for business!" cried the miller, with a sad and tender smile. "A saint of Paradise could not talk better. But it is not common sense, permit me to say, my dear lady. You will find purchasers for your property within a fortnight, who will be well pleased to pay no more than its price for it."

"But who will not be solvent, like M. Bricolin?"

"Ah, yes! that is his pride! being solvent. Solvent! a great word! He thinks himself the only man in the world who can say, 'I am *solvent!*' That is, he knows very well that there are others, but he dazzles you with the word. Do not heed him; he is a cunning sharper. Only pretend to make a bargain with another, should you even go so far as to make proposals and mock contracts. I should not be too precise, in your place. Do at Rome as the Romans do; and all stratagems are fair in war! Will you empower me to act? I swear to you that, as sure as you see this water, in a fortnight M. Bricolin shall give you your three hundred thousand francs, fairly counted, and a good stoup of wine to boot."

"I should never have the skill to follow your advice, and it seems to me much the quicker plan to make each of us happy in our own way — you, Rose, me, M. Bricolin, and my son, who will some day be glad of what I have done."

"Romance! romance!" said the miller. "You do not know what your son will think fifteen years hence, about love and money. Do not commit this folly; I will not lend myself to it, Mme. Marcelle — no, no, do not think it. I am as proud as anybody, and obstinate — as a sheep, and what is more, one of our Berry sheep. Besides, hark you! it would be sheer loss. M. Bricolin would promise everything and perform nothing. Considering your position, it is necessary that your contract of sale be signed before the end of the month, and certainly I could not hope to marry Rose within a month. To bring that about, she would need to be madly in love with me, which she is not. And then I could never bring myself to expose her to the tumult and scandal it would cause. How furious her mother would be! What amazement and what slander would meet her from her neighbors and acquaintances! What would not be said? Who would understand that you had demanded it of M. Bricolin through pure greatness of soul, and holy friendship for us? You do not know how malicious men are; and as to women — if you only knew how they talk! Your kindness toward me — no, you cannot imagine, and I should not dare tell you how it would be interpreted, and by M. Bricolin first of all. Or else they would say that Rose — sweet, innocent creature! — had committed an error, and confided it to you, and that you, to save her honor, had undertaken to dower the culprit. In short, it cannot be; and I have given you more reasons than I hope you need, to be convinced of it. Oh, that is not the way that I would obtain Rose! It must come naturally, and without bringing evil tongues upon her. I know very well that a miracle is needed to make me rich, or a misfortune to render her poor. God will come to my help, if she love me, and she may, perhaps, come to love me — may she not?"

"But, my friend, I cannot try to warm her heart towards you, if you take from me the means of governing her mercenary father. I would not have undertaken it without this thought, for it would be criminal in me to hurry this young and lovely girl into an unhappy passion."

"Ah! that is true!" said Grand-Louis, suddenly overcome; "and I see that I am mad — and indeed it was neither of myself nor of Rose that I wished to speak when I asked you to come here, Mme. Marcelle; you deceived yourself in your excellent goodness. I meant to speak to you of yourself alone, when you forestalled me by speaking of me; I let myself listen to you, like a great baby, and then must needs reply; but I return to my object, which is to oblige you to busy yourself with your affairs. I know M. Bricolin's concerns, his intentions, and his eagerness to buy your estate. He will not let it go into other hands, but to get three hundred thousand francs for it, you must ask him three hundred and fifty thousand. Only hold out, and you will have it; but, at any rate, he must not pay less for the property than it is worth. Fear nothing, he wants it too much!"

"I repeat to you, my friend, that I could not sustain this contest. It has lasted now but two days, and is already beyond my strength."

"Therefore you must have nothing to do with it. You can put your business into the hands of an honest and able notary. I know such an one. I will speak with him this evening, and you shall see him to-morrow, without any trouble. To-morrow is the festival of the patron saint of Blanchemont. There will be a great assembling on the terrace in front of the church. The notary will be there to walk about and talk, as is his custom, with his country clients; you shall go as by accident into a house where he will wait for you. You will sign a power of attorney, say two words to him, and I will say four, and you will only have to send M. Bricolin to battle it out with him. If he does not surrender, during this time your notary will find you another purchaser. Only a little prudence is needed to prevent Bricolin from suspecting that it is I who have recommended this man of business to you instead of his own, whom he has doubtless proposed, and whom you may have had the rashness to accept!"

"No, I had promised you to do nothing without your advice."

"That is very fortunate! Go, then, to-morrow at two o'clock, to walk on the bank of the Vauvre, as if to see the pretty spectacle of the fête from the foot of the terrace. I will be there, and will show the way to a sure and discreet person's house."

"But, my friend, if M. Bricolin discovers that you guide me in this matter contrary to his interest, he will dismiss you from his house, and you can never see Rose again."

"He will be very sharp if he discovers it! But if that misfortune should happen — I have told you, Mme. Marcelle, God would come to my help by a miracle, so much the more that I should have done my duty."

"Loyal and courageous friend, I cannot be induced thus to expose you!"

"And do I not owe it to you, when you wished to ruin yourself for me? Come, no childishness, my dear lady, we are quits —"

"There is Rose coming toward us," said Marcelle. "I have scarcely time to thank you —"

"No! Mlle. Rose is turning down the avenue with my mother, who has a hint to keep her awhile, for I have not finished, Mme. Marcelle; I have quite another thing to tell you! But you must be tired with walking so long. Since the court is free and the mill quiet, come and sit on this bench by the door. Mlle. Rose thinks us on the other side, and will not return till she has been round the field. What I have to say to you is more interesting than your business, and requires even more secrecy."

Astonished at this preamble, Marcelle followed the miller, and sat down with him on the bench, just beneath the door of the hay-loft, where Lemor could see and hear her.

"Well, then, Mme. Marcelle," stammered the miller, somewhat at a loss how to enter upon the subject, "you know the letter you intrusted to me?"

"Well, dear Grand-Louis!" answered Mme. de Blanchemont, her calm and rather wearied face suddenly flushing; "did you not tell me this morning that you had sent it?"

"Pardon — I did not put it in the post."

"You forgot it?"

"Oh, no, indeed."

"Lost it, perhaps?"

"Still less. I did better than put it in the box, I gave it directly to its address."

"What do you mean? It was addressed to Paris!"

"Yes, but finding the person for whom it was destined upon my road, I thought I should do better to hand it to him."

"Oh, heaven! you make me tremble, Louis," said Marcelle, turning pale. "You have made some mistake."

"No such fool! Perhaps I know M. Henri Lemor very well!"

"You know him? and he is in this part of the country?" said Marcelle, without endeavoring to dissemble her emotion.

In a few words Grand-Louis explained the manner in which he had recognized Lemor for the traveller who had already been to his mill, and for the intended recipient of the letter confided to him.

"And where was he going? and what was he doing at * * *?" asked Marcelle, with anxiety.

"He was going to Africa. He was passing through," replied the miller, who wished to see what she would say. "It is the direct road to Toulouse. He had taken the breakfast hour of the diligence to go to the post."

"And where is he now?"

"I cannot easily tell you where he may be; but he is no longer at * * *."

"He was going to Africa, you say? And why so far?"

"Precisely on account of the distance. That was his answer to my question."

"The answer is plainer than you think!" said Marcelle, with increasing agitation, and not even attempting to render it less evident. "My friend, you are not so unfortunate as you think! There are hearts more crushed than yours."

"Yours, for instance, my poor dear lady?"

"Yes, my friend, mine."

"But is it not a little your fault? Why did you command this poor young man to remain a year without hearing of you?"

"How! did he show you my letter?"

"Oh, no! he was suspicious and mysterious enough — go to! But I so questioned him, and besieged him, and guessed so much, that he was forced to confess that I was not deceived. Ah, faith! do you see, Mme. Marcelle, I am very inquisitive into the secrets of those I love, because, while one does not know what they think, one does not know how to serve them. Am I wrong?"

"No, friend, I am very willing that you should have my secrets as I have yours. But, alas! whatever be your good will and good heart, you can do nothing for me. Yet answer me. Did this young man send no answer, verbal or in writing?"

"He wrote you this morning a pile of trash, which I would not bring you."

"You have done me an ill service. So, I cannot know his intentions?"

"All he could say was this — 'I love her, *but* I am courageous.'"

"He said '*but?*'"

"He may have said '*and!*'"

"That would be so different! Think, Grand-Louis."

"He said now one, and then the other, for he repeated it often."

"This morning, you say? Did you leave the town only this morning?"

"I meant to say last evening. It was late, and we here call it morning from midnight."

"Heavens! what does it mean? Why no letter? Then you saw that he wrote one?"

"A little! he tore up four!"

"But what was in those letters? Was he, then, very irresolute?"

"First he said that he could never see you again, then that he would go and see you at once."

"And he resisted this last temptation? He was, indeed, courageous!"

"Ah! listen now! He was worse tempted than St. Anthony! but on the one hand, I deterred him; on the other, he feared to disobey you."

"And what think you of a lover who knows not how to disobey?"

"I think that he loves too much, and will get small thanks for it."

"I am unjust, am I not, dear Grand-Louis? I am too much moved; I know not what I say. But why did you, friend, deter him from following you? For he did think of it?"

"I should think he did! He even came a part of the way upon my cart. But I, pardon — I was too much afraid of displeasing you."

"You love, and you think others so severe?"

"Faith! what would you have said if I had brought him into the Black Valley? For instance — at this moment — if I told you that I had hidden him in my mill! Ah! for once, you would treat me as I deserved!"

"Louis!" said Marcelle, rising with an air of high resolve, "he is here. You confess it!"

"Not I, madam; it is you who make me say so."

"My friend," returned she, taking his hand cordially, "tell me where he is, and I forgive you."

"And if it were so," said the miller, a little frightened by Marcelle's impulsiveness, but enchanted by her frankness, "you would not dread gossiping tongues?"

"When he left me voluntarily, and my spirit was depressed, I could think of the world, foresee danger, create rigid and perhaps exaggerated duties for myself; but when he returns to me, when he is so near, what do you wish me to think of, and what would you have me fear?"

"Still it must be feared lest some imprudence on your part render your projects more difficult to carry into execution," said Grand-Louis, indicating to Marcelle, by a gesture, the window above her head.

Marcelle raised her eyes and met those of Lemor, who, quivering, and leaning towards her, was ready to shorten the distance by springing from the height of the roof.

But the miller coughed with all his might, and indicated to the two lovers by another gesture that Rose was approaching, with his mother and little Edward.

"Yes, madam," said he, raising his voice, "a mill like this brings in little; but if I could only set up a great millstone that I have in my mind, it would bring me easily — eight hundred francs a year!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

CADOCHE.

THE glance of the two lovers had been rapid and burning. A sovereign calm succeeded this excitement. They loved, they were sure of each other. All was said, explained, entreated between them in the electric passage of this look. Lemor threw himself back on the floor of the loft, and Marcelle, mistress of herself through her great happiness, greeted Rose without annoyance or regret. She allowed herself to be taken into the delightful neighboring coppice, and, after an hour's walk, she remounted her horse with her companion, and took the road to Blanchemont, after saying in a low voice to the miller—

"Conceal him well, I will return."

"No, no, not too soon," Grand-Louis had replied. "I will arrange an interview without danger, but let me take my measures. I will bring back your boy this evening, and will speak with you again if I can."

When Marcelle was gone, Lemor came out of his hiding-place, where he began to feel dizzy, not so much from the intoxicating fragrance of the hay, as from joy and emotion.

"Friend," said he gayly, to the miller, "I am your mill-boy, and I do not propose to live at your expense without working for you. Give me something to do, and you shall see that the Parisian's arms are tolerably good, notwithstanding his slight looks."

"Yes," replied Grand-Louis, "when the heart is satisfied the arms are supple enough. Your affairs are going on better than mine, my lad, and when we have a talk this evening it will be your turn to give me courage.

But now, you say rightly, we must be busy. I cannot spend my time in talking of love, and you might go mad with happiness if you were idle. Labor is wholesome for all; it sustains joy and diverts sorrow, which, perhaps, means that the good God made it for us all. Come, you shall help me raise my gate and set Grand'-Louise dancing. Her song has a virtue to restore my spirits when I am out of order."

"Ah! heavens! this child will recognize me!" said Lemor, perceiving Edward, who had escaped from the old woman's arms, and was climbing the steep staircase of the mill on his hands and knees.

"He has seen you already," replied the miller; "do not hide yourself, and seem to take no notice of him. It is not certain that he will know you, dressed as you are."

Edward, in fact, stopped, puzzled and silent. It was a month since Marcelle had abruptly left Montmorency to go to her dying husband. The boy had not seen Lemor since, and a month is an age in such a young child's memory. It is true this boy was precocious in the development of his faculties, but Lemor without a beard, his face dusty with flour, and wrapped in a peasant's blouse, was not very recognizable. Edward stood petrified before him for a minute, but meeting the grave and indifferent look of the friend who usually caught him in his arms, he cast down his eyes with a sort of embarrassment, and even of fear — a feeling which, in children, almost always mingles with astonishment; then he approached the miller, and said to him with the serious and meditative air he often wore:

"Who is that man there?"

"That? that is my mill-boy, Antoine."

"Thou hast two, then?"

"Boys? Good! I have them by dozens. That is *Alochon* No. 2."

"And Jean is Alochon No. 3?"

"As you say, General."

"Is thy Antoine cross?"

"No, no! but he is rather stupid, rather deaf, and does not play with children."

"In that case I will go play with Jean," said Edward, going carelessly away. At four years old the heart knows not what it is to be deceived, and the word of a beloved person has more power over the mind than the testimony of the senses.

The grain which the miller was that evening to make into flour was brought to the hopper. It was M. Bricolin's, contained in two sacks, each marked with two enormous initials.

"See," said Grand-Louis, this time with a laugh of some bitterness, "Bricolin of Blanchemont, as if to say, Bricolin living at Blanchemont. But when he buys the estate he will have to put another little *b* between the two great ones. That will read, Bricolin, Baron of Blanchemont."

"How!" said Lemor, occupied with another idea; "is this the Blanchemont grain?"

"Yes," replied the miller, who divined his meaning before he spoke, "it is the grain which will make the flour — of which will be made the bread — that will be eaten by Mme. Marcelle and Mlle. Rose. They say that Rose is too rich to marry a man like me; it is I, nevertheless, who furnish her with the bread which she eats!"

"So, we labor for *them!*" resumed Lemor.

"Yes, yes, boy. Attention to the word of command! This is no time to slight duty. The deuce! I might work for the king, and not put half so much heart into it!"

This every-day circumstance in the customs of the mill took a romantic and almost poetic coloring in the brain of the young Parisian, and he set himself to help the miller with such zeal and attention, that in the course of two hours he was perfectly acquainted with the trade. He found no difficulty in accustoming himself to the elementary and almost barbarous mechanism of the establishment. He comprehended the improvements which, with a little ready money (the forbidden fruit to the peasant), might be made in the rustic machine. He soon learned in *patois* the technical names of each part and each motion. Jean was a little disturbed and jealous at seeing him so active, and in such favor with his master.

But when Grand-Louis took pains to explain to him that the Parisian was there only temporarily, and that his (Jean's) place was not threatened with invasion, he was reassured, and even determined, like a good Berrichon as he was, to yield a portion of his work for some days to his officious companion. He made use of his liberty to go to Blanchemont, and carry back Edward, who began to be tired, and troubled at being so long parted from his mother. Grand'-Marie could no longer succeed in amusing him, and as Fanchon had come for him, Jean was not sorry to accompany his young fellow-servant to the chateau.

When the task was finished, Lemor, his forehead bathed with sweat and his face animated, felt more supple in body and more vigorous in will than for many months before. The long reveries which preyed upon his youth gave place to the healthy vitality, physical and moral, which Providence has attached to the accomplishment of human labor when the object is well defined, and the fatigue proportioned to the strength.

"Friend," cried he, "labor is beautiful and holy in itself; you were right in saying so as we began! God imposes and blesses it. It seemed sweet to me to work for my mistress's food; oh! how much sweeter still to work at the same time to nourish the life of a family of equals and brothers! When each shall labor for all, and all for each, how light will be the toil, how fair our life!"

"Yes, my profession, in that case, would be one of the most elegant!" said the miller, with a smile of quick intelligence. "Grain is the noblest of plants; bread the purest of food. My function might well deserve some esteem, and on holidays a crown of wheat-ears and bluebells might be wreathed around poor *Grand'-Louise*, to whom no one pays any attention now; but what would you have? In *these days of ours*, as M. Bricolin says, I am only a mercenary in his employ, and he says of me: 'A man *like him* think of my daughter! A wretch who grinds the grain, when it is I who sow the seed and possess the earth!' A fine difference, nevertheless! My hands are cleaner than his are with turning over manure;

that is all. So now, my boy, the work is done, let us make haste with the soup. I will warrant you will think it better than in the morning, though it should be ten times as salt; and then I will take myself to Blanchemont, to carry these two sacks."

"Without me?"

"Doubtless! Have you a fancy to be seen at the farm?"

"Nobody there knows me."

"That is true. But what would you do there?"

"Nothing; I will help you unload your sacks."

"And what good will that do you?"

"I may see *somebody* pass through the court."

"And if *somebody* should not pass?"

"I shall see the house that she inhabits. Perhaps I shall hear her name spoken."

"In my opinion we might give ourselves that pleasure without going so far."

"It is two steps from here?"

"You have an answer for everything. Will you commit no imprudence?"

"You think I do not love her, then? Would you commit any in my place?"

"I might,—if I were beloved! Let us see! you will not gaze at her as you did from the loft door? Do you know I thought you would set my hay on fire?"

"I will not look at her at all."

"And you will not speak to her?"

"What pretext could I have to speak to her?"

"You will seek none?"

"I will not even enter the court, if you forbid me. I will look at the walls from a distance."

"That will be wisest. I will permit you to scent, from the gate, the wind that blows over the chateau—that is all."

The two friends started at fall of day, Sophie, loaded with the two sacks, walking magisterially before them. Grand-Louis, sad at heart, spoke little, and gave vent to his gloomy thoughts only by heavy strokes with his whip, right and left, upon the hedges filled with wild mulberries and pale honeysuckles, more fragrant than those we cultivate in our gardens.

They had passed a cluster of cabins called Le Cortioux, when Lemor stopped, as he was walking by the side of the ditch, surprised to see a man lying at full length under the hedge, his head supported upon a plump wallet.

"Oh! oh!" said the miller, without expressing any wonder, "you came near walking on *my uncle.*"

The sleeper awoke with a start, at the sonorous voice of Grand-Louis. He rose briskly, seized with both hands a great staff that lay by his side, and enunciated an energetic oath.

"Don't be vexed, uncle!" said the miller, laughing. "It is only friends who pass, by your leave; for though the roads are yours, as you say, you don't forbid any one to use them, do you?"

"Oh! ho!" said the man, rising entirely, and displaying a gigantic form and a repulsive appearance; "I am the best of proprietors, thou knowest, my little fellow. But it is rather an abuse of my goodness to walk over my face. Who may this bad Christian be, that does not see an honest man stretched on his bed? I do not know him, and I know everybody here and elsewhere."

So speaking, the beggar disdainfully measured Lemor with his eye, while the latter, on his side, observed him with repugnance. He was a bony old man, covered with filthy rags, and with a stiff beard of mingled black and white, that resembled the panoply of a hedgehog. His high-crowned hat, partly falling in shreds, was surmounted — as if in derision — by a bow of white ribbon, and a bunch of sadly faded artificial flowers.

"Make yourself easy, uncle," said the miller; "this is a good Christian — go to!"

"And how is one to know him?" resumed uncle Cadoche, taking off his hat and reaching it to Henri.

"Come," said the miller to Lemor, "don't you understand? My uncle asks you for a sou."

Lemor threw his alms into the hat of the uncle, who took it immediately out, and turned it over in his long fingers with a sort of rapture.

"It is a great sou!" said he, with a sordid smile. "Perhaps ten revolutionary *decimes!* No! God be praised! It is a Louis XV.! it is my king! a king whose reign I have seen! It will bring good luck to me, and to thee too, my nephew," added he, laying his large angular hand upon Lemor's shoulder. "Thou mayst now say that thou art one of my family, and I will recognize thee, even if disguised from head to foot."

"Come, come, good-evening, uncle," said Grand-Louis, joining his offering to Lemor's. "Are we friends?"

"Always!" answered the beggar, in a solemn voice. "Thou hast always been a good relation — the best of all my family. Therefore it is to thee, Grand-Louis, that I shall leave all my wealth. I have told thee so for a long time, and thou shalt see if I keep my word."

"Keep it! parbleu, I reckon upon it!" said the miller, gayly. "Will the bouquet be part of it?"

"The hat will, but the bouquet and the ribbons are for my last mistress."

"The deuce! But I thought a great deal of the bouquet!"

"I believe you did," said the beggar, who was walking behind the two young men, and followed them with an alert step, notwithstanding his great age. "The bouquet is the most precious thing in the inheritance. It is blessed, seest thou? It came from Saint Solange's chapel."

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"How can so devout a man as you call yourself talk of his mistresses?" said Henri, who felt only a strong disgust for this absurd personage.

"Hold thy tongue, nephew!" replied uncle Cadoche, with a side glance at him; "thou speakest like a fool!"

"Excuse him, he is only a child," said the miller, who habitually jested with the *tall uncle.* "He has no beard on his chin yet, and thinks he must talk! But where are you going so late, uncle? Do you expect to sleep in your own house to-night? It is very far."

"Oh, no; I am going directly to Blanchemont, for the fête to-morrow."

"Ah, true! it is a good day for you. You will collect at least forty sous."

"No, but still enough to have a mass said to the good saint of the parish."

"Then you still like masses?"

"The mass, and brandy, nephew, and a little tobacco, are the salvation of soul and body."

"I do not deny it, but brandy is not warming enough to allow one to sleep in such a way, in a ditch, at your age, uncle."

"One sleeps where one happens to be, nephew. If you are tired, you stop and take a nap on a stone, or your wallet — when it is not too empty."

"It is my opinion that yours is pretty full this evening."

"Yes, nephew, thou oughtest to let me put it on thy horse; it tires me a little."

"No, Sophie has enough of a load. But give it to me, I will carry it for you to Blanchemont."

"That is right! Thou art young, and shouldst wait upon thy uncle. See, here it is. Is thy blouse clean?" he added, with an air of disgust.

"Oh, it is only flour," said the miller, taking the beggar's satchel; "it will not quarrel with bread. Thousand thunders! there *is* something inside — old crusts?"

"Crusts! I take no crusts. I should like to see anybody offer them to me! I would fling them in their faces, as I did once to the Bricolin woman."

"Is that what has made her afraid of you?"

"Yes. She says that I might set fire to her barns," said the beggar, with a sinister look. Then he added, in a wheedling tone, "Poor dear woman of the good God! as if I were wicked! Whom did I ever injure?"

"Nobody that I know," answered the miller. "If you had, you would not be where you are now."

"Never, never did I harm any one," returned uncle Cadoche, lifting his hand towards heaven, "since I have never been taken up by justice for anything whatsoever. Have I been in prison a single day of my life? I have always served the good God, and the good God has always protected me, these forty years that I gain my poor living."

"About how old are you, uncle?"

"I do not know, my child, for the register of my baptism has been mislaid in the course of time, like many others; but I must be more than eighty. I am about ten years older than Father Bricolin, who seems, nevertheless, older than I."

"It is true enough, you are in fine preservation, and he — but he indeed met with accidents which do not happen to everybody."

"Yes," said the beggar, with a deep sigh of compunction. "He has had misfortunes! — "

"Is it a story of your time? Are you not of that country?"

"Yes, I was born in Buffec, near Beaufort, where the accident happened."

"And you were then in the country?"

"Oh! I should think I was. Sweet holy Virgin! I cannot think of it without trembling! Were we afraid in those days!"

"Can you be afraid of anything — you, who are always alone at all hours on the roads?"

"Oh! now, my good son, what is there to fear for a poor man like me, who possesses only the three rags that cover him? But in those times I had a little property, and lost it by the robbers."

"How! Were the chauffeurs with you too?"

"Oh! not at all! I had not enough to tempt them; but I had a little house that I let to journeymen. When the country was full of fear of the robbers, nobody would live in it. I could not sell it, and I had not enough to repair it. It fell into ruin. I was obliged to incur debts that I could not pay. Then my field, the house, and a pretty hemp-field that I had, were sold by forced sale. So I was compelled to take up the wallet; I left the country, and since that time I always journey like the children of the good God."

"But you never quit this district?"

"Surely not; I am known here. I have my patrons and all my family here."

"I thought you were all alone?"

"And all my nephews, then?"

"True, I forgot; me, for instance, my comrade here, and all those who never refuse you their sous to buy your tobacco. But say now, uncle, who were these chauffeurs of whom we were speaking?"

"Ask the good God, my poor child, for He alone knows."

"I have heard that there were rich people among them, who were in good standing."

"They say there are some still living who are full and fat, have good estates, good houses, make a figure in the country, and would not give so much as half a sou to a poor man. Ah! if they had been people like me, they would all have been hung!"

"True enough, Father Cadoche!"

"I was still very fortunate in not being accused, for everybody was suspected in those times, and justice fell only on the poor. Those were imprisoned who were white as snow, and when the true culprits were in hand, orders came from higher powers to release them."

"Why was that?"

"Because they were rich, doubtless. When didst thou ever see, nephew, that the rich were not pardoned?"

"That is true again. Come, uncle, here we are at Blanchemont. Where will you have me carry your bread bag?"

"Give it back to me, nephew. I will go sleep in the curate's stable; he is a holy man, and never sends me away. He is like thee, Grand-Louis; thou hast never shown me the cold shoulder. Therefore thou shalt be recompensed; thou shalt be my heir, as I have always promised thee. Except the bouquet, which I shall give to little Borgnotte, thou shalt have all — my house, my clothes, my wallet, and my pig."

"Good, good!" said the miller; "I see that I shall be too rich at last, and that all the girls will want to marry me."

"I admire your heart, Grand-Louis," said Lemor, when the beggar had disappeared behind the hedges of the enclosure, which he plunged straight through without troubling himself to find a gap or seek a path. "You treat this beggar as if he were really your uncle."

"Why not, since he takes pleasure in playing the great relation, and promising his inheritance to everybody? A fine inheritance, by my faith! His mud-cabin, where he sleeps with his pig, neither better nor worse than St. Anthony, and his cast-off rags, which turn one's stomach! If that were all I needed to satisfy M. Bricolin, my affairs are in fine order!"

"Yet, in spite of the disgust with which his person inspires you, you took his wallet on your shoulders to ease him. Louis, your spirit is truly evangelic."

"A mighty wonder! Could I refuse so slight a service to a poor devil who, at the age of eighty, still begs his bread? After all, he is an honest fellow. Everybody feels an interest in him, because he is trusty, though a little hypocritical and libertine."

"So it seemed to me."

"Bah! What virtues do you think such people can have? It is much when they have only vices, and do not commit crimes. Did he not talk sensibly, notwithstanding all?"

"Towards the last I was struck with it. But why does he think himself everybody's uncle? Is it a trace of insanity?"

"Oh, no! it is a way he has. Many of his trade affect some peculiarity to make themselves amusing, draw attention, and divert people who would give alms neither from prudence nor charity. It is unhappily the custom among us for the poor to play the part of buffoons at the gates of the rich. But here we are at the farm of Blanchemont, comrade. Stay, take my advice! do not go in. I do not doubt that you would control yourself; but she, unprepared, might give a scream, or utter a word—let me at least warn her."

"But everybody is still up in the village; will not the presence of an unknown person be remarked, if I wait for you here?"

"Then you will do me the kindness to step into the warren. No one walks there at this hour. Sit down rationally in a corner. As I come back, I will whistle as if I called a dog, saving your presence, and you will rejoin me."

Lemor yielded, hoping that the ingenious miller would find some means to bring Marcelle in this direction. He slowly followed the shaded path through the warren, stopping every instant to listen, holding his breath and retracing his steps, not to lose a moment of so thrice happy a meeting.

It was not long before he heard light steps brush the turf, and a rustling in the foliage which convinced him that some one was approaching. He slipped into the bushes to be sure that he was not mistaken, and saw dimly through the leaves the slender form of a woman coming towards him. We easily believe what we desire, and Henri, not doubting that it was Marcelle, sent by the miller, came forward and hastened to meet the figure. But he stopped on hearing an unknown voice call cautiously, "Paul! Paul! art thou there, Paul?"

Perceiving that he was mistaken, and thinking that he had fallen upon the appointed rendezvous of another, Henri would have escaped. But he made some noise in stepping on the dry branches, and the maniac, seeing him in the midst of her dream of love, darted upon his track with the speed of an arrow, crying in a plaintive voice: "Paul! Paul! I am here! Paul! it is I! — do not go! Paul! Paul! thou always fliest me!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MANIAC.

LEMOR was not much troubled at first by this adventure. He thought that under favor of the night he could easily avoid this woman. He had not distinguished her sufficiently to suspect her insanity, and naturally flattered himself that he could run much better than she. But he soon found that he was mistaken, and that all his agility was not too much merely to maintain the distance between them. He was obliged to cross the entire warren, and soon came to the avenue at its foot, where Bricoline was accustomed to walk for whole hours, and where, in certain places, the grass was worn by her feet. The fugitive, till now somewhat impeded by the roughness of the path and the roots entangled above the earth, exerted all his strength in the avenue to reach the terrace. But the maniac, when under the influence of one burning idea, became light as a dry leaf driven by storms, and she followed him so rapidly that Lemor, lost in surprise, and thinking it of great importance that he should not be seen near enough for future recognition, plunged anew into the wood, and tried to lose himself in the shade. But the maniac knew every tree, every thicket, and — so to speak — every branch in the warren. During the twelve years that she had passed her life there, there was not a nook into which her body was not mechanically accustomed to penetrate, although the state of her mind prevented her from forming any rational plan of action. Yet more, the height of her frenzy made her completely insensible to physical suffering. She would have left fragments of her flesh upon the thorns without perceiving it, and this sort of cataleptic condition gave her no little advantage over him she wished to reach. She was, besides, so small, her attenuated body occupied so little space, that she slid like a lizard between serried stems, where Lemor was obliged laboriously to force himself a passage, or, more frequently, to retrace his steps.

Finding himself more embarrassed than before, he regained the avenue, still closely pursued, and determined to leap the ditch, although unable to estimate its width, on account of the thick bushes that covered it. He sprang, and fell on his knees among the brambles. But he had scarcely time to rise, when the phantom, crossing this obstacle without a leap, and heeding neither stones nor briars, was at his side, and clinging to his garments. Lemor's imagination was vivid as an artist's or poet's; and seeing himself seized by this truly fearful being, he believed that he was in the power of a dream, and, struggling as if with nightmare, succeeded in freeing himself from the madwoman, who uttered inarticulate shrieks, and in resuming his race across the fields.

But she was upon his track, as agile in the bristling furrows of a newly reaped wheat-field, where the stubble was hard and prickly, as she had been in the windings of the park. At the end of the field Lemor cleared another fence, and found himself in a hollow way of rapid descent. He had not taken ten steps when he heard the spectre behind him, still crying in a stifled voice, "Paul! Paul! why dost thou fly from me?"

Lemor's imagination was more and more wrought upon by the fantastic nature of this race. While disengaging himself from the maniac's grasp, the clear starlight had permitted him vaguely to discern the cadaverous face, the lean and torn arms, and the long black locks floating over the bloody rags of this singular apparition. That the unhappy creature was insane, had not crossed his mind. He thought himself pursued by a jealous woman, crazy perhaps for the moment, since she persisted in taking him for another. He doubted whether he should not stop to speak to and undeceive her; but how, then, should he explain his presence in the warren? Unknown, and gliding like a thief through the darkness, would not such a débût awaken strange suspicions at the farm, and ought he not, above all, to avoid signalizing his appearance in the country by a scandalous or absurd adventure?

He thus resolved to run on, and this extraordinary exercise lasted nearly half an hour without interruption. Lemor's brain grew heated in spite of himself, and at moments he felt himself becoming frantic, in seeing the inconceivable persistence and the supernatural speed of the relentless phantom on his track. It was like the legends told of goblins weird, and malignant spirits of night.

At last Lemor found the Vauvre at the bottom of the valley, and, though bathed in sweat, he was about to throw himself in and swim across, conceiving that this obstacle placed between him and the spectre would finally deliver him, when he heard behind him a horrible, agonized scream, which sent a sudden chill through his whole being. He turned and saw nothing. The maniac had vanished.

Henri's first impulse was to profit by what might be only a moment's respite to fly still farther, and entirely conceal his course. But this fearful scream left too painful an impression on him. Had it really proceeded from this woman? The sound was scarcely human; and yet what grief, what terrible despair it seemed to express! "Could she have fallen and severely wounded herself?" thought Lemor; "or, when she lost sight of me behind the willows, did she think I was drowned? Was it a cry of agony, or terror? Or was it but rage at not being able to follow me into the water, where she might suppose I had thrown myself? But if she should have fallen into some ditch, or down some precipice which I did not see as I ran? If this unhappy chance-encounter should cost the unfortunate creature her life! No, whatever be the result, it is impossible for me to abandon her in the horrors of the last agony."

Lemor retraced his steps, and sought the unknown without finding her. The steep road by which he had come skirted the extremity of the warren; it was enclosed by lofty hedges and no ditch; there was no bog, no pool where she could have been drowned. The sandy soil showed no sign, as far as Lemor could distinguish, of the fall of a body. He was still seeking, lost in conjecture, when he heard some one repeatedly whistle, as if calling a dog. At first he was so preoccupied and excited with his adventure, as to pay little attention to it. But, finally, he remembered that this was the signal agreed upon with the miller, and, in despair of finding his pursuer, he answered Grand-Louis's call by another whistle.

"I think the devil is in you," said the latter to him, in a low voice, when they met in the warren, "to go and walk so far when I advised you not to stir! It is a quarter of an hour here that I have been hunting for you in the wood, not daring to call too loud, and losing patience — But how you look! all panting and torn! The deuce take me, my blouse has had a poor time of it on your back, by what I can see. But speak! you look like a hunted rabbit, or rather like a man chased by a will-o'-the-wisp."

"You have hit it, my friend. Either Jean's stories of the nocturnal goblins of the Black Valley have an inexplicable groundwork of reality, or I have had a hallucination. But I think it is an hour (perhaps an age, for aught I know!) that I have been fighting against the devil."

"If you did not obstinately drink cold water at all your meals," replied the miller, "I should think that you had simply been in the necessary condition for meeting the Wild Hunter, *the white leveret*, or *Georgeon the wolf-leader*. But you are too learned and rational a man to believe in such stories. Something must, indeed, have happened to you. A mad dog, perhaps?"

"Worse than that," said Lemor, gradually recovering his spirits; "a mad woman, my friend! a sorceress, who ran quicker than I, and who vanished, I know not how, at the moment that I was about to fling myself into the water to get clear of her."

"A woman? oh! oh! and what did she say?"

"She took me for one Paul, who seems to be very near her heart."

"I guessed as much — it was she! it was the crazy girl from the chateau. How could I be so stupid as not to foresee that you might meet her here! Truly, it went out of my head! We are so used to seeing her trotting about in the evening like an old weasel, that we pay no more attention to her. And yet it is a heart-rending story when one thinks of it! But what the devil set her upon you? She generally flies when any one comes her way. Her trouble must be worse of late; yet the dose was strong enough before, poor girl!"

"Who is this unfortunate creature?"

"You shall know by and by. Let us walk faster, if you please. You look half dead with fatigue."

"I believe that I broke my knees in my fall."

"Nevertheless, there is *somebody* at the end of the path there, who is tired with waiting for you," said the miller, lowering his voice still more.

"Oh!" cried Lemor, "I feel lighter than the night wind!"

And he began to run.

"Gently!" said the miller, holding him back. "Run only on the grass. No noise! She is there under that great tree. Do not leave the spot. I will keep watch around in case of surprise."

"Does she run any risk in coming here, then?" said Lemor, alarmed.

"If I had thought so, I would have prevented her from coming! They are all busy at the new chateau with to-morrow's fête. But at least I could keep off the crazy girl, if she were to take a fancy to return and torment you."

Henri, lost in his happiness, forgot all else, and hurried to the feet of Marcelle, who was waiting for him beneath a clump of oaks, in the most unfrequented part of the wood.

There was no room for explanation in their first rapture. Diffident and reserved as they had always been, still they felt a transport which no human words could have fitly expressed. They were bewildered at meeting so soon, after having almost believed in an eternal separation, and yet they sought not to explain to each other the processes by which their minds had been brought to such speedy retraction of all their courageous projects of sacrifice. They mutually divined the bitter pain and the irresistible impulse that had forced them together at the very moment when they had vowed to part.

"Madman! who would have left me forever!" said Marcelle, yielding her beautiful hand to Lemor.

"Cruel! who would have banished me for a year!" replied Henri, covering that fair hand with burning kisses.

And Marcelle clearly understood that her resolution of a year of courage had been more sincere in her own eyes than the eternal exile to which Lemor had tried to condemn himself.

Thus, when they could speak, an effort of which they were incapable till they had long gazed at each other in the silence of ecstasy, Marcelle was the first to recur to this truly laudable design.

"Lemor," said she, "this is but a sunbeam between two clouds. The law of duty must be obeyed. Even if here we should meet with no obstacle to the security of our relation, there would be something deeply irreligious in so quick an union, and this hour ought to be our last meeting before the expiration of my mourning. Tell me that you love me, and that I shall be your wife, and I shall have all the strength necessary to wait for you."

"Do not speak to me now of separation!" said Lemor, impetuously. "Oh! let me taste the full sweetness of this fairest moment of my life. Let me forget what was yesterday, and what will be to-morrow. See what a soft night, what a beautiful heaven! How quiet and balmy is this spot! You are here! It is indeed you, Marcelle! It is not your shadow! We are both here! We have found each other again by chance, and involuntarily!

God willed it, and we were *both* so happy to obey! — you, too, Marcelle, as well as I? Is it possible? No, I do not dream, for you are here, near me, with me! alone! happy! we love one another so well! We could not part, we cannot, we never can!"

"And yet, my friend — "

"I know — I know what you would say. To-morrow, some day, you shall write to me, and give me your commands. You well know that I shall obey! Why speak to me of it this evening? Why mar this moment, which has not its equal in my whole life? Let me persuade myself that it will never end. Marcelle, I see you! Oh! how clearly I see you, in spite of the darkness! How beautiful you have grown within three days — since this morning, when you were already so beautiful! Oh! tell me that your hand shall never again leave mine! How firmly I hold it!"

"Ah, you are right, Lemor! Let us rejoice in meeting again, and not remember yet that we must part — to-morrow — some day."

"Yes, some day — another day!" cried Henri.

"Do me the favor to speak lower," said the miller, drawing near. "I cannot help hearing all that you say, Monsieur Henri!"

The two lovers remained for nearly an hour lost in a pure ecstasy, making sweet dreams for the future, and speaking of their happiness as if it were not to be broken, but begun with the morrow. The perfumes of the night were borne to them by the breeze, and the serene stars passed over their heads, without inducing them to remark the inevitable passage of Time, who lingers only in the hearts of happy lovers.

But the miller, after having given more than one signal of impatience from a distance, came and interrupted them when the declination of the polar stars marked ten o'clock on the celestial dial.

"My friends," said he, "it is impossible for me to leave you here, and impossible to wait for you an instant longer. I no longer hear the cow-herds singing in the farm-yard, and the lights are gone from the windows of the new chateau. Mlle. Rose's is the only one burning; she is waiting for Mme. Marcelle to go to bed. M. Bricolin will soon make his rounds with his dogs, as he always does on the eve of a fête day. We must part quickly."

Lemor remonstrated; he had, he said, but just come.

"That may be," said the miller; "but for me, do you know I must go to La Châtre this evening?"

"How! on my business?" said Marcelle.

"So please you! I want to see your notary before he goes to bed, for I do not care to speak to him to-morrow in open day, lest M. Bricolin should think me conspiring against him."

"But, Grand-Louis," said Marcelle, "I do not wish that you should risk, for me —"

"Enough, enough!" replied the miller. "I am going to do just as I please. And hark! I hear the barking of those yellow dogs! Go back through the field, Mme. Marcelle, and we, my Parisian, will take the upper way, if you please. Come! let us scamper!"

The lovers parted without exchanging another word. They feared to be reminded that they must look upon this interview as their last. Marcelle had not the courage to fix a day for Henri's departure, and he, dreading lest she should fix it, hastened away, after repeatedly kissing her hand in silence.

"Well, what have you determined?" asked the miller, when they reached the edge of the park.

"Nothing, my friend," said Lemor. "We spoke only of our happiness —"

"For the future; but now?"

"There is no present, no future. All is alike when one loves."

"Here is where you scoured the country. I hope now that you will keep yourself quiet, and not make me race through the woods at night in a panic. Come, my lad, you are on your road. Can you easily find Angibault alone?"

"Perfectly well. But do you not wish me to accompany you to the town where you are going?"

"No, it is too far. One of us would be on foot and delay the other, unless we were to do as is the fashion here, and both mount Sophie; but the poor beast is too old, and, besides, she has not had her supper yet. I am going to look for her by a tree down there, where I fastened her after I made believe go back to the mill. Do you know I have been really anxious about leaving poor Sophie so in God's keeping! I hid her well in the branches; but if some of the vagabonds who always come for the assembly should have taken a fancy to trick her away from me! While you were billing and cooing down there, Sophie ran in my head! —"

"Let us go together and find her!"

"No, no, not so! You are always ready enough to turn back towards the chateau, I see that well enough! Go on, and tell my mother to go to bed without troubling herself; I may come home rather late. M. Tailland, the notary, will keep me to sup. He loves his ease, is a bit of a gourmand and a kind man. Thus I shall have time to talk to him about the Blanchemont affairs, and Sophie will eat her measure without asking his advice."

Lemor did not insist upon accompanying his friend. Whatever affection and gratitude he felt towards the good miller, he preferred to be alone, after the evening's emotions. He longed to think of Marcelle without disturbance, and to retrace the sweet dream he had just enjoyed at her feet, and he took the way to Angibault very much as a somnambulist takes that to his bed. I know not whether he followed the direct road, whether he crossed the river by the bridge, whether he doubled his distance, or often forgot himself by the fountain margins. The night was full of transport; and from the cock that roused the cabin echoes with his trumpet cry to the cricket mysteriously chirping in the grass, everything seemed to him to repeat, in tones of triumph or secrecy, the cherished name of Marcelle.

But when he arrived at the mill, he felt so worn with fatigue, that, as soon as he had told the miller's good mother not to wait for her son, he threw himself on the little bed that Louis had had prepared for him in his own chamber. Grand'-Marie, having warned Jean to wake quickly and not make his master wait, when he wanted him to put Sophie in the stable, went, also, to rest. But maternal tenderness sleeps with but one eye shut; and as a storm came up, the good woman waked with a start at every peal of thunder that passed over the valley, thinking that she heard her son knocking at Jean's door in the mill. When the day broke, she rose softly and went to advise him not to make too much noise, because Grand-Louis, who had doubtless returned late, would need to sleep longer than usual. She was much surprised, and almost alarmed, when Jean answered that his master had not yet returned.

"Impossible!" said she. "He never sleeps out when he goes only to Blanchemont."

"Ah! bah! mistress, it is the eve of the fête. Nobody sleeps over there. The wine-shops are open all night. The bag-pipers come in playing their finest marches, enough to set one's heart a-dancing; they wish it were already the morrow; nobody goes to bed, for fear of oversleeping, and losing ever so little of the fun. The master has been amused, and has made a *white night* of it."

"The master does not spend his nights in wine-shops," answered the mother, shaking her head, after opening the stable-door to see if Sophie were not at the manger. "I thought," she added, "that he had come back without choosing to wake thee, Jean. It is hard to him; he had rather wait on himself than disturb a child like thee, who sleepest like a log. But he cannot have slept! He was very tired, too; day before yesterday he had a long journey. He went to bed late that night, and now this, not at all! —"

Grand'-Marie began her holiday toilet with a deep sigh. "This wretched love!" thought she, "it is that which torments him, and keeps him on foot day and night. How will it all end with him?"

CHAPTER XXV.

SOPHIE.

THE good old woman was lost in her sad thoughts; and, after the custom of some old people, she expressed them aloud, as she went from her closet to her dressing-table, mechanically busied with preparing her antique corsage, with basque skirts, and the plaid chintz apron which she had fondly preserved from her youth, holding it in high esteem, because it had cost then four times as much as would now buy a much handsomer stuff.

"Do not grieve about it, mother," said Grand-Louis, who had heard her from the threshold of the door, where he had just come without her perceiving him; "all this will end as it best can; but your son will always try to make you happy."

"Eh! my poor child, I did not see thee!" said the mother, a little ashamed, even at her age, at being surprised by her son with her long gray hair fallen over her shoulders; for in her time the peasant women of the Black Valley held the concealment of their hair as an extreme point of modesty. But Grand'-Marie soon forgot this impulse of superannuated prudery, on seeing the miller's paleness and disorder.

"Jesus! my God!" said she, clasping her hands; "how tired thou art! One would say that all the night's rain had poured on thee! And truly, thou art yet damp. Go quick, and change thy clothes. Couldst thou not find a house to shelter thee? And how wretchedly thou lookest this morning! Ah, my poor boy, one would say thou wert trying to make thyself sick!"

"Eh! mother, do not worry yourself so!" said the miller, forcing his habitual air of cheerfulness. "I passed the night under shelter with friends — people with whom I had business, and who made me stay to supper. I only got a little wet because I came home on foot."

"On foot? and what hast thou done with Sophie?"

"I — lent her to — something — down there — "

"To whom? something down there?"

"Don't you know? Bah! I will tell you by and by. If you want to go to the Assembly, I will take the little black mare, and you shall ride on a pillion."

"Thou wert wrong to lend Sophie, my child. She has not her equal, and should be spared. I had rather see thee lend both the others."

"So had I. But what would you have? It so happened. Come, mother, I will go and dress, and you will call me when you are ready to go."

"No, no, I see that thou hast not tasted sleep this night, and thou must take a nap. There is still plenty of time before the hour for mass. Ah! Grand-Louis, how thou dost look! it is not worth while to run such a race!"

"Be easy, mother; I do not feel sick, and I shall not do so often. One must be a little crack-brained sometimes!"

And the miller, still more dejected at having troubled his mother, whose uneasiness and displeasure were never expressed without extreme gentleness and wise reserve, went and flung himself on his bed with an angry movement, which awakened Lemor.

"Are you getting up already?" said the latter, rubbing his eyes.

"Not at all; I am going to bed, so please you," answered the miller, beating up his bed with his fist.

"Friend, you are unhappy!" returned Lemor, thoroughly awakened by the unequivocal signs of Grand-Louis's inward rage.

"Unhappy? Yes, sir, I confess it; perhaps more so than the thing is worth; but, in short, it gives me more pain than I could wish. I cannot help it."

And large tears rolled from the miller's weary eyes.

"My friend!" cried Lemor, leaping from his bed, and beginning rapidly to dress himself, "I plainly see that some misfortune has happened to you this night! And I sleeping here so quietly! My God! what can I do? where shall I run?"

"Ah! do not start, it is useless," said Grand-Louis, shrugging his shoulders, as if ashamed of his weakness; "I have run enough to-night for nothing, and here I am at my wits' end—and for a piece of nonsense, after all! But what would you have! one is as fond of an animal as of a person, and regrets an old horse like an old friend. You do not understand this, you city people, but we good country folks, we live with our beasts, and there is no great difference between us!"

"And you have lost Sophie, I understand?"

"Lost? yes, that is to say somebody has stolen her from me."

"Yesterday, perhaps, in the warren?"

"Exactly. You remember that I had a sort of presentiment of evil? When you left me, I went back to the place where I had snugly hidden her, and from which the poor beast, as patient as a lamb, would not certainly have loosened herself—she never broke rein or halter in her life. Well, sir, horse and bridle, all had disappeared! I searched, I ran—nothing! Then, too, I dared not ask much about her, especially at the farm; what would they have thought? They would have asked me how I could have lost my beast on the way, when I started on her back. They would have believed me drunk, and Mme. Bricolin would not have failed to represent to Mlle. Rose that I had met with some ugly adventure, unworthy of a man who thinks of nothing in the world but her. I thought at first that some one wanted to play me a trick. I went into all the houses. All the town was still on foot. I dropped in at one place and another, without seeming to have any purpose. I entered every stable, even that of the chateau, without being seen; no Sophie! Blanchemont is filled at this time with people of *every flour*, and there is certainly some cunning rogue in the number who came on foot, and has gone back on horseback, thinking that he need see no more of the fête, as it has been good enough for him before its commencement. Come, we must not think of it any longer. Luckily, I did not lose my wits in the midst of all this. I went on *Shank's mare* to La Châtre. I saw my notary; it was rather late; he had done supper, and was rather heavy while digesting it; but he promised me to be at the fête. When I left him, I still searched and beat the thickets like a night hunter. I ran through the rain and thunder till daylight, still hoping that I should find my thief hidden somewhere. In vain! I do not wish to make a noise about my misfortune, for it would create gossip; and if inquiry should be instituted, it would be a nice story for us, of a horse hidden in the warren and left there for an hour, without my being able to explain why and how. I had put her at some distance from your rendezvous, so that if she should move a little, the noise would not draw attention toward you. Poor Sophie! I ought to have trusted to her good sense. She would not have stirred!"

"Thus I am the cause of this misfortune! Grand-Louis, I am more sorry for it than you, and you will certainly permit me to indemnify you as much as is in my power."

"Silence, sir! I care nothing for the slight sum that the old creature might have brought at a fair! Do you think I should feel this anxiety about a hundred or so of francs? Oh, no, indeed! it is she that I regret, and not her price; she had none in my eyes. She was so courageous, so intelligent, she knew me so well! I am sure that at this moment she is thinking of me, and looking askance upon whoever is taking care of her! If he would but take good care of her! If I were sure of that, I should be almost consoled. But he will rub her down with his whip-handle, and feed her on chestnut burrs! For it must be some knave from La Marche who will take her to his mountains to feed in a field of stones, instead of her pretty little meadow by the water-side, where she lived so well, and where she would still play with the young fillies, when the sight of the green grass put her in fine good humor! And my mother! how she will grieve! Besides, I can never tell her how the misfortune happened. I have not had courage yet to tell her at all. Do not mention it to her till I have contrived some story to make the news less bitter to her."

There was something at once comic and touching in the simple lamentation of the miller; and Lemor, grieved at being the cause of his sorrow, was so much moved by it, that the kind-hearted Louis undertook to comfort him.

"Come, come," said he, "here is enough nonsense about a four-legged creature. I know very well that it is not your fault, and I did not for an instant think of reproaching you with it. Let it not spoil the remembrance of your happiness, friend! it is but a small price to pay for so sweet an hour as you spent during that time! And if I ever had a rendezvous with Rose myself, I should not mind riding horseback on a broomstick all my life! Now, do not tell Mme. Marcelle about it. It would be like her to give me a horse worth 1,000 francs, and that would really hurt me. I do not want to attach myself again to animals. There is enough trouble in life with people! Do you, I say, think of your love, and of making yourself fine, but still in peasant fashion, to go to the fête, for you must let your face begin to be known in the country. That will be better than hiding yourself, which would start suspicion at once. You will see Mme. Marcelle. You will not speak to her, indeed! Besides, you will have no opportunity, she will not dance; she is in deep mourning! but Rose is not, faith! and I count upon dancing with her till night, now that the dear papa gives consent. And that makes me think that I must sleep a couple of hours, so as not to look like one dug up from the grave. Do not vex yourself any more; you will hear me snore in five minutes."

The miller kept his word; and when towards ten o'clock his black mare, much handsomer but less beloved than Sophie, was brought him, when dressed in his Sunday garb of fine cloth, his chin well shaved, his color fresh and his eye bright, he pressed his powerful steed between his long legs, his mother, seating herself behind him by the help of a chair and Lemor's arm, felt a sensation of pride at being the mother of the handsome miller.

They had slept no better at the farm than at the mill; and we are obliged to retrace our steps, to put the reader in possession of the events that took place there on the night preceding the fête.

Lemor, divided between the painful agitation caused him by his strange rencontre with the maniac, and the delirious joy of seeing Marcelle again, had not remarked, while in the warren, that the miller was not much calmer than himself. Grand-Louis had found the farm-yard full of noise and stir. Two pataches and three cabriolets, which had brought within their solid walls all the relations of the Bricolins, were reposing upon their weary shafts along the stables and manure heaps. All the poor neighbors, eager to earn a scanty pittance, had been put in requisition to help in preparing the supper of the guests, who were more numerous and more hungry than had been expected at the new chateau. M. Bricolin, more vain of showing his opulence than annoyed at the expense involved, was in the best possible humor. His daughters, his sons, his cousins, nephews, and sons-in-law, each in turn privately inquired how soon the old chateau would be repaired and re-stuccoed, with the Bricolin cypher as an escutcheon over the door.

"For thou wilt soon be lord and master of Blanchemont," said they in common chorus, "and thou wilt manage thy fortune somewhat better than all those counts and barons to whom thou wilt succeed, to the greater glory of the new aristocracy, the nobility of hard money." Bricolin was quite intoxicated with pride; and while replying with a sly smile to his dear relatives, "Not yet, not yet! never, perhaps!" he delightedly assumed all the importance of a lord chatelain. He paid no further regard to expense, and, swelling his portly person like a turkey-cock, thundered his orders to his servants, his mother, daughter, and wife. The whole house was in confusion. Mother Bricolin was plucking scarcely-dead chickens by the dozen, and Mme. Bricolin, who had been at first extremely cross and peevish amidst the tumult of the kitchen, began also, in her way, to be merry, on seeing the ample repast, the ready chambers, and the gratifying admiration of her guests. It was under favor of all this disorder that the miller was able easily to speak with Marcelle, and that she, excusing herself on account of a headache, had withdrawn from the supper, and, during the festival, joined Lemor at the foot of the warren.

Rose herself, while the table was setting, had found more than one excellent pretext for straying into the court, and saying a friendly word or so in passing Grand-Louis, as she was used to do. But her mother, who scarcely lost sight of her, soon discovered the means of ridding herself quickly of the miller. Obliged to submit to the commands of her husband, who had imperatively enjoined upon her not to be rude to Grand-Louis, she conceived the idea of satisfying her own hatred, and making Rose ashamed of her friendship for him, by ridiculing him in concert with her other daughters, and her female relations, who were all, young and old, sufficiently malicious and insolent to assist her. She hastily and confidentially told each one that this village wit fancied himself agreeable to her daughter; that Rose knew nothing of it, and paid no attention to it; that M. Bricolin, not wishing to believe it, treated him with far too much kindness; but that she had from good authority learned a curious fact, to wit, that the *handsome miller*, the pet of all the abandoned girls in the country, had often boasted that he could please the richest bourgeoise whom it might suit him to court, one as well as another, — and hereupon Mme. Bricolin named those present, laughing, meanwhile, sharply and scornfully, tucking up her apron, and setting her arms akimbo.

From the female part of the family, the confidence was rapidly passed in whispers to all the Bricolins of the other sex, so that Grand-Louis, who thought of nothing but going to join Lemor, found himself suddenly assailed by epigrams so flat as to be incomprehensible, and his retreat accompanied by half-stifled laughter, and whisperings of extreme impertinence. Not comprehending the mirth which he excited, he left the farm uneasy, anxious, and full of contempt for the coarse wit of the country bourgeois whom this evening had gathered at Blanchemont.

According to Mme. Bricolin's advice, care was taken that M. Bricolin should not perceive the conspiracy, and all engaged to persecute the miller in Rose's presence the next day. "It was necessary," said her mother, "to humiliate this workman before her eyes, to teach her not to follow her good heart too far, but keep peasants at a distance."

After supper the fiddlers were sent for, and there was dancing in the court in anticipation of the morrow. It was in an interval of quiet that the miller, uneasy, and in haste to go to La Châtre, had asserted that the evening's amusement was over at the new chateau, and had forced the lovers to part much sooner than they wished.

When Marcelle returned to the farm, the diversion was resumed; and feeling the same need of solitude and thought that had carried Lemor into the windings of the Black Valley, she returned to the warren, and walked there slowly till midnight. The sound of the bagpipe, joined to that of the hurdy-gurdy, is rather agonizing to the ears, when near; but, from a distance, there is a charm in their rustic tones, and in the barbaric harmony which gives originality to their frequently charming melodies, that penetrates simple natures, and sends a peculiar thrill to the hearts of those who remember the sound in their happy childhood. The strong vibration of the bagpipe, although harsh and nasal, and the piercing cry and energetic *staccato* of the hurdy-gurdy, are made for one another, and mutually correct each other. Marcelle listened to them with pleasure for some time, and observing that distance increased their charm, she strolled to the extremity of the warren, lost in visions of a pastoral life, in which, it may easily be conceived, her love made all burdens light.

But she suddenly stopped on seeing, almost under her feet, the maniac stretched on the ground, motionless, and apparently dead. Notwithstanding the disgust which she felt at the shocking uncleanliness of the unfortunate creature, she determined, after vainly attempting to rouse her, to lift her in her arms, and succeeded in dragging her for some distance. She leaned her against a tree, and not feeling strength to carry her further, was about to go and call help from the farm, when Bricoline began to recover from her torpor, and to push away with her bony hand the long hair, rough with grass and sand, that hung over her face. Marcelle helped her remove this thick veil, which stifled her breath, and daring for the first time to speak to her, asked if she were in pain.

"Certainly I am in pain!" answered the maniac, with shocking indifference, and in the same tone with which she might have said — "I am still alive;" then she added, in a brief and imperious voice: "Hast thou seen him? He has returned. He will not speak to me. Did he tell thee why?"

"He told me that he would come back," said Marcelle, trying to indulge her lunacy.

"Oh, he will not come back!" cried the madwoman, impetuously rising; "he will never come back! He is afraid of me. Everybody is afraid of me, because I am very rich, very rich! So rich that I am forbidden to live! But I will be rich no longer; to-morrow I will be poor. It is time the end came. To-morrow everybody shall be poor. Thou shalt be poor too, Rose, and thou shalt no longer frighten people. I will punish the wretches who would kill me, shut me up, poison me —"

"But there are some people who pity you, and only wish you well," said Marcelle.

"No, there are none!" replied the maniac, angrily, and fearfully excited. "They are all my enemies. They have tortured me, they have driven red-hot iron into my brain. They have nailed me to trees. They have thrown me more than a thousand times from the top of the towers upon the stones. They have pierced my heart with long steel needles. They have flayed me alive; that is why I cannot now dress myself without feeling horrible pain. They would have torn off my hair because it gave me some defence from their blows. But I will be avenged! I have drawn up a complaint; fifty-four years I have been writing it in every language, that it may reach every sovereign in the universe. I will have them restore me Paul, whom they have hidden in their cellar, and abuse as they do me. I hear him scream every night when they torture him — I know his voice. Hark! hark! do you hear him?" she continued, in an agonized voice, listening to the merry notes of the bagpipe. "You see that they are making him suffer a thousand deaths! They will devour him, but they shall be punished, punished! To-morrow, I, too, will make them suffer! They shall suffer so that I shall take pity myself —"

Thus speaking with frantic volubility, the unhappy creature darted through the thickets, and rushed towards the farm, while it was impossible for Marcelle to follow her rapid course and impetuous leaps.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE EVE OF THE FÊTE.

AT the farm the dance was kept up more pertinaciously than ever. The servants entered into the pleasure, and a thick dust rose from under their feet, but neither that inconvenience, nor stones, sun, rain, or the fatigue of harvest or mowing, ever yet prevented the Berrichon peasant from dancing with enthusiasm. No people dance with more mingled sobriety and passion. To see them advance and retreat in the bourrée, so gently and regularly that their crowded ranks resemble the pendulum of a clock, one would never guess the pleasure they derive from this monotonous exercise, and would still less suspect the difficulty of seizing its elementary rhythm, which must be marked with rigorous precision by every step and every attitude of the body, while, to attain perfection, the labor must be entirely concealed by great gravity of movement and an apparent languor. But after watching them some time, one is astonished at their indefatigable endurance, and appreciates the kind of soft and simple grace which preserves them from lassitude; and certainly an observation of the same persons dancing ten or twelve hours together without weariness, would make one believe that they were bit by a tarantula, or prove that they are passionately fond of dancing. Now and then the inward joy of the young men is revealed by a peculiar cry which they give without losing the imperturbable composure of their faces, and, at times, with a forcible stamp of the foot, they bound like young bulls, falling back with careless flexibility and resuming their phlegmatic, swinging motion. The Berrichon character is completely portrayed in this dance. As for the women, they must invariably glide along the ground so as to graze the soil, which demands more lightness than might be thought, and their graces are marked by a rigid propriety.

Rose danced the bourrée as well as a peasant girl, which is no little praise, and her father watched her with pride. Everybody was gay and lively, and the musicians, their thirst well satisfied, spared neither their arms nor lungs. The dancers looked more graceful in the half obscurity of a fine night, and, above all, the charming Rose, who seemed to glide like a white sea-bird over calm waters, and to be borne along on the evening breeze. The melancholy which was cast over all her movements this evening, made her more beautiful than usual.

Still Rose was at heart a true peasant girl of the Black Valley in all her native simplicity, and took pleasure in the dance, were it only to be in practice to answer the numerous invitations which Grand-Louis would not fail to give her the next day. But suddenly the bagpiper lost his footing upon the cask which served him as pedestal, and the wind contained in his instrument escaped in a strange and plaintive tone, that caused all the astonished dancers to stop and turn towards him. At the same moment, the hurdy-gurdy, rudely snatched from the hands of the other musician, rolled at the feet of Rose, and the maniac leaped from the rustic orchestra upon which she had sprung with a bound like a wild-cat's, and threw herself into the midst of the bourrée, crying, "Woe, woe to the assassins! Woe to the executioners!" Then she flung herself upon her mother, who had advanced to restrain her, seized her throat with her claws, and would inevitably have strangled her if the old Mother Bricolin had not prevented her, by taking hold of her round the waist. The maniac had never committed any act of violence towards her grandmother, whether it were that, without knowing her, she retained a sort of instinctive love for her, or that she knew her alone among the others, and remembered the good woman's efforts in favor of her love. She made no resistance, and suffered herself to be drawn into the house, uttering agonized shrieks, which filled every one with dismay and horror.

When Marcelle, who had followed the elder Mlle. Bricolin as closely as she could, arrived at the house, she found the dance interrupted, everybody frightened, and Rose nearly fainting. Mme. Bricolin doubtless suffered inwardly, were it only at the exposure of this household wound to all eyes; but in her activity in restraining the lunatic, and stifling the noise of her screams, there was something violent and energetic, more like the firmness of a policeman incarcerating a disturber of the peace, than the solicitude of a despairing mother. The grandmother showed as much grief, and more sensibility. It was a sad sight to see the poor old woman, with her harsh voice and masculine manners, caressing the maniac, and talking to her as to a child, coaxing and flattering by turns. "Come, my darling," she said, "thou always behavest so well, thou wilt not make thy grandmother unhappy? Thou must go quietly to bed, or else I shall be vexed, and will not love thee any more." The maniac understood nothing of what she said, and did not even hear it. Clinging to the foot of her bed, she gave vent to fearful howls and cries, and her diseased imagination persuaded her that she was at this instant enduring the punishments and tortures which she had fantastically depicted to Marcelle.

The latter, after assuring herself, first of all, that her child was sleeping quietly in Fanchon's care, busied herself with Rose, who was distracted with fright and grief. It was the first time that Bricoline had given vent to the hatred accumulated during twelve years in her crushed heart. Once a week, at most, she cried and wept when her grandmother persisted in changing her garments. But those were the cries of a child, and these were the shrieks of a fury. She had never addressed a word to any one, and now, for the first time in twelve years, she had uttered threats. She had never struck any one, and she had just attempted to kill her mother. In short, for twelve years this mute victim of her parents' avarice had kept her inexpressible suffering to herself, and they had accustomed themselves, with a sort of brutal indifference, to the deplorable spectacle. They were no longer afraid of her, they were tired of pitying her, they endured her presence as an inevitable misfortune; and, if there were remorse in their hearts, it was not avowed, perhaps even to themselves. But there were necessary recurrent phases in the terrible disease which preyed upon her, and the time had come when her misery was dangerous to others. It was, at last, necessary to attend to it. M. Bricolin sat before his door, listening with a stupefied look to the coarse condolence of his family.

"It is a great misfortune for you," said one, "and we have seen you bear it already too long. Such patience is beyond human strength, and you must finally decide to put this unfortunate girl in a mad-house."

"She cannot be cured," replied he, shaking his head. "I have tried everything. It is impossible. Her disease is too severe; she must die of it!"

"That might be the happiest thing for her. You see that she is in too pitiful a state here. But even if they could not cure her, you would be spared the pain of seeing her, and taking care of her. She would be prevented from injuring you. If you do not take care, she will end by killing somebody, or her own self, before your eyes."

"That would be shocking! But what will you have? I have told her mother so an hundred times, and yet she will not part from her. Trust me, she loves her still in her heart, and that may well be; mothers always feel something for their children, as it seems."

"But, you may depend on it, she will be better off there than here. They are taken very good care of now. There are handsome establishments where they want for nothing. They are kept clean, allowed to work and be busy, and it is even said that they are amused, taken to mass, and permitted to hear music."

"In that case they are happier than at home," said M. Bricolin. After a moment's reflection, he added, "and does all this cost a great deal?"

Rose was deeply affected. She was the only one, with the exception of her grandmother, who had not become insensible to the grief of poor Bricoline. If she avoided speaking of it, it was because she could not do so without accusing her parents of this moral *filicide* committed by them; but twenty times a day she caught herself shuddering with indignation at hearing from her mother's lips the selfish and avaricious maxims to which her sister had been sacrificed before her eyes. As soon as she recovered from her faintness, she wished to assist her grandmother in quieting the maniac; but Mme. Bricolin, fearing lest the spectacle should make too deep an impression, and having a vague instinct that excessive grief might prove contagious, even in its physical results, sent her away with the harshness which belonged even to her best and kindest intentions. Rose was incensed at this refusal, and returned to her chamber, which she paced, for part of the night, in a state of great excitement, but abstaining from speech, for fear of expressing herself too strongly with regard to her parents, before Marcelle.

Thus the night, which had opened with such exquisite delight, proved extremely painful to Mme. de Blanchemont. The cries of the maniac ceased at intervals, and were then renewed more terribly, more fearfully. When they stopped, it was not by degrees and a gradual diminution, but, on the contrary, abruptly, in the midst of their greatest intensity, and as if a violent death had suddenly interrupted them.

"Would not one say they were murdering her?" cried Rose, pale, and hardly able to support herself as she walked the room. "Yes, it seems like an execution!"

Marcelle would not tell her what frightful torments the maniac really believed herself enduring, and did endure, in her thoughts, at that moment. She concealed from her the interview she had had with her in the park. From time to time she went to see the sufferer. She found her stretched on the floor, her arms tightly clasped round the foot of her bed, and almost suffocated with exhaustion from screaming, but her eyes open, fixed, and her mind evidently in perpetual activity. Her grandmother knelt beside her, trying in vain to slip a pillow under her head, or introduce a spoonful of a soothing potion into her contracted mouth. Mme. Bricolin, pale and motionless, sat opposite in an arm-chair, and her resolute and strongly furrowed countenance bore the traces of deep sorrow, which would not confess its sin, even to God. Chounette, standing in a corner, sobbed mechanically, without offering her services, and without any one's thinking of demanding them. There was deep despondency in these three faces. The maniac alone, when not howling, seemed to revolve dark thoughts of hatred in her brain. There was a sound of snoring in the next room; but M. Bricolin's heavy sleep was not undisturbed, and from time to time appeared to be broken by bad dreams. Farther still, beyond the opposite partition, Father Bricolin was heard coughing and moaning; ignorant of the sufferings of others, the little strength that remained to him was not enough to support his own.

At length, towards three in the morning, the violence of the storm seemed to overpower the maniac's exhausted organs. She fell asleep on the ground, and they succeeded in putting her into bed without her perceiving it. It was doubtless long since she had known a moment's repose, for her sleep was deep and heavy; and everybody was enabled to rest, even Rose, to whom Mme. de Blanchemont hastened with the favorable news.

If Marcelle had not found this occasion to devote herself to poor Rose, she would have repented the unlucky inspiration which had brought her to this habitation of avarice and misfortune. She would have hastened to seek another shelter than this, so totally un-beautiful, so disagreeable in prosperity, so forlorn in adversity. But to whatever new discomfort she might still be exposed, she resolved to stay while she could be of assistance to her young companion. Happily the morning was calm. Everybody slept till late, and Rose had not waked when Mme. de Blanchemont, scarcely awake herself, received from Paris, thanks to the rapidity of our present communications, the following answer to the letter which she had written to her mother-in-law three days before:

Letter of the Countess of Blanchemont to her daughter-in-law, Marcelle, Baroness of Blanchemont.

"MY DAUGHTER, — May Providence, who sends you all this courage, mercifully preserve it to you! Great as it is, I am not astonished at it from you. Do not praise mine. At my age one has not long to suffer! At yours — happily there is no clear idea of the length and the difficulty of existence. My daughter, your plans are praiseworthy, excellent, and so much the wiser that they are necessary, — still more necessary than you imagine. We, too, my dear Marcelle, are ruined! and it may be that we can leave nothing as an inheritance to our beloved grandson. My unhappy son's debts exceed all that you know, all that could have been foreseen. We shall temporize with the creditors; but we accept the responsibility, and thereby deprive Edward of the easy fortune which he might have expected at our decease. Bring him up, then, simply. Teach him to create his own resources by his talents, and to maintain his independence by the dignity with which he will support misfortune. When he is a man, we shall be no longer living. Let him respect the memory of the old grandparents who preferred the honor of a gentleman to his pleasures, and whose only legacy to him will be a pure and unreproached name. The son of a bankrupt could have had none but dishonest luxury — the son of a guilty father will be, at least, under some obligation to those who have sheltered his life from public condemnation.

"To-morrow, I will give you details; to-day, I am stricken by the discovery of this new abyss. I tell you in few words. I know that you can understand and endure everything. Adieu, my daughter; I admire and love you."

"Edward!" said Marcelle, covering her sleeping boy with kisses, "it was then written in heaven that thou shouldst have the glory, and perhaps the happiness, of not succeeding to the wealth and rank of thy fathers! So perish great fortunes, the work of ages, in one day! Thus the ancient masters of the world, drawn on by fatality yet more than by their own passions, are laden with the accomplishment of the decrees of that Divine wisdom which labors imperceptibly for the levelling of all mortal power! Mayst thou some day comprehend, oh, my child, that this law of Providence is kind to thee, since it throws thee among the sheep at Christ's right hand, and separates thee from the goats at his left! My God, give me the wisdom and strength necessary to make of this child a man! To make him a patrician, I should have had only to fold my arms, and let riches do their work. Now I need enlightenment and inspiration! My God, my God! Thou hast appointed me this task! Thou wilt not abandon me!"

"Lemor," she wrote an instant later, "my son is ruined, his family is ruined. My child is poor. He might have been unworthy and contemptible as a rich man. He must now be made courageous and noble as a poor one. Providence has reserved this mission for you. Now will you ever speak of abandoning me? Is not this child, who was an obstacle between us, a dear and sacred bond? Unless you should lose your love for me in a year, who now can oppose our happiness? Take courage, my friend, and go! A year hence, you will find me in some cabin in the Black Valley, not far from the mill of Angibault."

Marcelle wrote these few lines with lofty emotion; and when her pen traced the words, "Unless you should lose your love for me in a year," an imperceptible smile gave an ineffable expression to her features. She enclosed her mother-in-law's letter as explanation, and sealing the whole, put it in her pocket, thinking that it would not be long before she saw the miller, and perhaps Lemor himself, in the peasant costume so becoming to him.

The maniac slept all the day. She was feverish, but she had been so every day for twelve years, and her present exhaustion, which was an entirely new symptom, augured a favorable crisis. The physician who had been called from the town, and who was accustomed to seeing her, did not think her ill in comparison with her ordinary state. Rose, much reassured, and restored to the sweet instincts of youth, slowly and very coquettishly dressed herself. She wished to be simple, not to startle her friend by making a display of her wealth before him — she wished to look well, to please him. So she sought out the most ingenious combinations, and succeeded in being modest as a rustic maiden, and beautiful as an angel of Paradise. In the midst of all her grief, she had trembled a little, without being willing to recognize the feeling, at the idea of losing this whole bright day. The pleasure of enrapturing for a whole day the man by whom one is beloved is not to be renounced without regret, at eighteen; and this fear, unknown to herself, had mingled with the deep and sincere sorrow that she had felt for her sister. When she appeared at high mass, Louis had been long watching for her entrance. He was so placed as not to lose her an instant from his sight. She found herself accidentally by Grand'-Marie, and he was deeply touched by seeing her put her pretty shawl under his mother's knees, in spite of the good woman's refusal.

After the service, Rose skilfully took the arm of her grandmother, who was accustomed to stay by her old friend Grand'-Marie, whenever she had the pleasure of meeting her. This pleasure became more unfrequent every year, as age rendered the distance between Blanchemont and Angibault more difficult for the two matrons to pass over. Mother Bricolin loved to talk. Continually "snubbed," as she said, by her daughter-in-law, she had a torrent of restrained words to pour into the bosom of the mill-dame, who, less communicative, but sincerely attached to the companion of her childhood, patiently heard and discriminately replied.

In this way Rose hoped that she should escape Mme. Bricolin's surveillance, and even the society of her other relations, all day, as her grandmother much preferred intercourse with the peasants, her equals, to that with the parvenus of her family.

Beneath the old trees on the terrace, opposite a charming view, the crowd of pretty girls pressed around the musicians, who, placed in pairs upon their scaffolds, very near one another, did battle with arms and lungs, in jealous competition, each one playing in his own key, and according to his own price, without any concern for the horrible discordance produced by this assemblage of obstreperous instruments, each straining to be the one to overpower his neighbors in tune and measure. Amidst this musical chaos, each set of dancers remained inflexibly at its post, never confounding the music for which it had paid with that shrieking two steps off, and never striking the foot to a false measure; a wonderful training of ear and habit. The arbors resounded with no less heterogeneous noises, some singing at the top of their voices, some earnestly talking over their affairs — these drinking friendship, and those threatening to fling their cups at each other's heads, the whole enhanced by two indigenous policemen, passing with a fatherly air through the midst of the tumult, and sufficing, by their pressure, to restrain a population so peaceable as rarely to go from words to blows.

The close circle formed around the first bourrées became yet more dense when the lovely Rose opened the dance with the tall miller. They were the handsomest couple of the fête, and their firm, light steps electrified all the others. The dame of the mill could not help remarking this to Mother Bricolin, and she even added that it was a pity that two such good and handsome young people were not intended for one another.

"As for me," unhesitatingly replied the old grandmother, "I would make neither one nor two of it, if I were mistress, for I am sure that thy boy would make my granddaughter happier than she will ever be with another. I know very well that Grand-Louis loves her; that may easily be seen, though he has the sense not to speak of it. But what wilt thou have, my poor Marie? Our people think of nothing but money. I was foolish enough to yield all my property to my son, and since that, they do not listen to me any more than if I were dead. If I had done differently, I could now dower Rose and marry her as I pleased. But I have nothing left but feelings, and that kind of coin has no great currency in our house."

Notwithstanding all Rose's address in passing from one group to another to avoid her mother, and always find herself either beside or opposite to her friend, Mme. Bricolin and her party succeeded in joining her, and establishing themselves around her. Her cousins made her dance till she was tired, and Grand-Louis prudently withdrew, feeling that at the least quarrel he should be excited beyond reason. They had tried to arouse him by saucy jests; but the clear, bold glance of his large blue eyes, his disdainful composure, and great stature, easily restrained the bravery of the Bricolins. When he was gone, they took their fill of abuse, and Rose was amazed to hear her sisters, her sisters-in-law, and her numerous cousins assert that this tall fellow looked like a fool, that he danced absurdly, that he appeared puffed up with pretension, and that none of them would dance with him *for the world.* Rose had self-love. This defect in her had been too assiduously cultivated not to conquer her sometimes. Everything had been done to corrupt and repress her good, frank nature; and if there had not been entire success, it was because there are incorruptible souls on which the spirit of evil has little hold. Nevertheless, she was pained at hearing her lover so obstinately and bitterly defamed. It vexed her; she dared not promise herself to dance with him again, and declaring that she had a headache, she returned to the farm, after vainly looking for Marcelle, whose influence would, she felt, have restored her courage and calmness.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CABIN.

MARCELLE had been waiting for the miller at the foot of the terrace, as he had expressly advised her. At the end of two hours, she saw him enter a closely shaded enclosure, and make a sign to her to follow him. After crossing one of the little peasant gardens, so ill kept, and consequently so pretty, green, and tufted, she entered, by slipping under the hedge, the court of one of the poorest cabins in the Black Valley. This court was twenty feet by six, shut in on one side by the low house, on the other by the garden, and at each end by straw-covered sheds, which served to shelter a few hens, two sheep, and a goat, which comprise all the wealth of the rustic day-laborer, the man who earns his bread from day to day, and owns nothing, not even the wretched house that he inhabits, and the narrow enclosure that he tills. The interior of the house was as miserable as the entrance, and Marcelle was touched at seeing by what extreme neatness womanly courage held the ground against the horrors of destitution. There was not a speck of dust on the uneven and stony soil which formed the floor; the two or three poor pieces of furniture were bright and shining, as if just varnished, and the few articles of earthenware, set up on boards against the wall, were carefully washed and arranged. With most of the peasants of the Black Valley, real and serious want is wisely and nobly concealed under these conscientious habits of order and neatness. Their rustic poverty is touching and pathetic. One would willingly live with these people. They inspire no disgust, but interest, and a sort of respect. How little of the superfluity of the rich would be needed to extract from their lives all the bitterness hidden beneath this appearance of poetic calm!

This reflection struck Marcelle to the heart when Pauline came to meet her, with one child in her arms and three more clinging to her apron, all fresh and clean, in their Sunday clothes. Pauline was still young and handsome, although faded by the fatigues of maternity and abstinence from things most necessary to life. No wine, no meat, nor even vegetables, for a laboring and nursing woman! Nevertheless, the children could have spared health to Marcelle's, and a smile of kindness and confidence was upon the pale, thin lips of the mother.

"Come in and take a seat, madam," said she, offering a straw chair covered with a coarse but clean napkin of tow-cloth. "The gentleman whom you expect has been here already, and not finding you, has gone to take a turn in the assembly, but he will be back directly. If I could offer you something meanwhile! Here are some freshly-gathered plums and some nuts. Come, Grand-Louis, do thou take some fruit from my garden too. I wish I could offer thee a glass of wine! but we make none, thou knowest; and if it were not for thee, we should not always have bread."

"You are very poor?" said Marcelle, slipping a piece of gold into the pocket of the little girl, who was touching, with astonishment, her black silk dress; "and Grand-Louis, who is not very rich himself, helps you?"

"He?" answered Pauline; "he is the best-hearted man that the good God has made! Without him we should have died of cold and hunger these three winters past; but he gives us grain and wood; he lends us his horses to go on pilgrimage when any of us are sick; he —"

"There is quite enough to make me out a saint, Pauline," said the miller, interrupting her. "Truly, it is a great thing in me not to have deserted a good workman like thy husband!"

"A good workman!" said Pauline, shaking her head.

"Poor dear man! M. Bricolin tells everybody that he is lazy, because he is not strong."

"But he does what he can. Now I like good will in people, so I always employ him."

"That is what makes M. Bricolin say that thou wilt never be rich, and showest poor judgment in employing sickly people."

"Well, and if nobody employs them, must they then die of hunger? Fine reasoning!"

"But, you know," said Marcelle, sadly, "the moral that M. Bricolin draws from it — *the worse for them!*"

"Mlle. Rose is very good," resumed Pauline. "She would help the unfortunate, if she could. But the poor young lady can do nothing but secretly bring a piece of white bread to make broth for my little one. And that is against my will, for if her mother saw her! oh! the rude woman! But so goes the world. There are both bad and good people. Ah! there comes M. Tailland. You will not wait long."

"Pauline, thou knowest what I said to thee," said the miller, putting his finger on his lips.

"Oh!" answered she, "I would sooner cut out my tongue than say a word."

"Because, thou seest — "

"Thou needst not explain the why and how, Grand-Louis; it is enough that thou bidst me be silent. Come, children!" said she to her three young ones who were playing by the door; "let us go see the assembly a little."

"The lady has put a gold piece in thy little girl's pocket," whispered Grand-Louis to her. "It was not to purchase thy discretion, she well knows that thou dost not sell it; but it was because she saw thy need. Put it up, the child would lose it, and do not thank her; the lady does not like compliments, since she gave thee this charity in secret."

M. Tailland was an honest man, very active for a Berrichon, capable enough in business, only rather too fond of his ease. He loved good easy-chairs, nice little collations, long repasts, very hot coffee, and smooth roads for his cabriolet. He found none of these at the fête of

Blanchemont. Meanwhile, though swearing a little against country amusements, he willingly stayed all day to be of service to some, and to transact business with others. In fifteen minutes' conversation he demonstrated to Marcelle the possibility, and even the probability, of selling her estate at a high price. But as to selling quickly, and receiving ready money, he was not of the miller's opinion. "Nothing is done quickly with us," he said. "Still it would be madness not to try to rise fifty thousand francs upon Bricolin's offer. I will make every effort. If I do not succeed in a month, I may counsel you, in your peculiar situation, to yield. But it is an hundred to one that before then, Bricolin, who has set his heart on being lord of Blanchemont, will compromise with you, if you can feign the rough but necessary quality of great sharpness, with which I plainly see, madam, you are not too well provided. Now, sign this power of attorney I have brought you, and I am off, for I do not wish to seem as if I were interfering in an underhand way with my legal brother Varin, whom your tenant would have had you choose."

Grand-Louis accompanied the notary to the entrance, and they disappeared in different directions. It had been agreed that Marcelle should leave last and alone, after waiting a few minutes with the doors closed, so that if any inquisitive person observed their movements, the house might be thought deserted.

The door of the cabin was divided transversely into two parts, the upper of which served as a window for the entrance of light and air. Glazed windows separate from the door, were unknown in the older buildings of our peasants. Pauline's was built fifty years since, for people who were well off; while now, the poorest, if they live in a new house, have sash windows, and locks on their doors. Both parts of Pauline's door were fastened inside and out by means of a wooden peg, fitting into a hole in the wall.

When Marcelle was thus shut up, she found herself in perfect darkness, and asked herself what could be the intellectual life of people who, too poor to have candles, were compelled to go to bed at nightfall, and in winter to remain in darkness during the day to keep themselves from the cold. "I said and believed that I was ruined," thought she, "because I was obliged to leave my gilded and silken rooms; but how many steps are there yet upon the ladder of social existence before coming to such poverty-stricken life as this, which scarcely differs from that of the animals! No choice between enduring at all hours the intemperance of the seasons, and burying themselves in the void nothingness of idleness, like the sheep in their fold! How can this wretched family occupy themselves in the long winter evenings? In talking? And of what but their misery can they talk? Ah! Lemor is right, I am still too rich to dare to say before God that I have nothing with which to reproach myself."

Meanwhile, her eyes became accustomed to the obscurity. Through the ill-jointed door came a vague glimmer, which grew brighter every instant. Suddenly, Marcelle started on perceiving that she was not alone in the cabin, but her next emotion was not fear — Lemor was beside her. He had hidden, unknown to every one, behind the serge curtains of the hearse-shaped bed. He had gathered courage to seek an interview with Marcelle, telling himself that it was the last, and that he must go afterwards.

"Since you are here," said she, dissembling, with tender coquetry, the joy and emotion of her surprise, "I will tell you of what I was thinking. If we were reduced to living in this cabin, would your love bear up against the troubles of the day and the inaction of the evening? Could you live deprived of books, or unable to make use of them for want of a drop of oil in the lamp, and of time in the hours of manual labor? After years of every sort of trial and privation, should you think this dwelling picturesque in its dilapidation, and the life of the poor poetic in its simplicity?"

"I had precisely the same thoughts, Marcelle, and thought of asking you the same thing. Would you love me if I had drawn you into such poverty by my Utopian dreams?"

"It seems to me that I should, Lemor."

"And why do you doubt me? Ah! you are not sincere in your reply!"

"I am not sincere?" said Marcelle, putting both her hands within those of Lemor. "My friend, I desire to be worthy of you, and this is why I restrain in myself the romantic extravagance which might lead even a woman of the world to affirm and promise everything, without holding to anything, and saying to herself the next day, 'That was a pretty romance of mine yesterday!' For myself, not a day passes that I do not strictly question my conscience, and I believe that I am sincere in answering you that I cannot imagine the situation, were it amid the horrors of a dungeon, where affliction could make me cease to love you!"

"O Marcelle! dear and noble Marcelle! But why, then, did you doubt me?"

"Because a man's mind is different from ours. It is accustomed to other aliment than tenderness and solitude. A man must have activity, labor, and the hope of being useful, not only to his family, but to humanity."

"Is it not also a duty freely to cast one's self into this impotence of poverty?"

"Are there, then, contradictory duties in our times? For power of mind is acquired only by the help of instruction, and instruction is obtained only through the power of money, and yet all that is so enjoyed, acquired, or possessed, is to the detriment of him who can neither acquire nor possess celestial or material wealth."

"You attack me with my own weapons, Marcelle. Alas! how shall I answer you, unless by saying that we do indeed live in an age of enormous and inevitable inconsequence, where kind hearts desire the right, and are forced to accept the wrong? Reasons are not wanting to prove, as all the happy do, that it is a duty to guard, instruct, and idealize one's own existence, so as to render one's self an active and powerful instrument in the service of mankind, and that to sacrifice, humble, and annihilate one's self like the early Christians of the wilderness, is to neutralize a power, to quench a light that God has sent to men to teach and save them. But how arrogant is this reasoning, although, from the lips of certain enlightened and sincere men, it appears just! It is the reasoning of the aristocracy. Let us preserve our riches to give in alms, say also the devotees of your caste. It is we, say the princes of the Church, whom God has appointed to enlighten men. It is we, cry the democratic bourgeois, and we alone, who should instruct the people in liberty. Yet what alms, what education, and what liberty have these, from their strength, given to the wretched! No! private charity has no power, the Church no will, modern liberalism no wisdom. I feel my spirit faint, and my heart sink in my bosom, when I think of the issue of the labyrinth in which we are involved; we who seek for truth, and find falsehood and threats in the response of society. Marcelle, Marcelle, let us love one another, that the spirit of God abandon us not!"

"Let us love!" cried Marcelle, throwing herself into her lover's arms, "and do not leave me, do not abandon me to my ignorance, Lemor, for thou hast lifted me from the narrow Catholic horizon where I tranquilly sought my salvation, placing my confessor's decision above that of Christ, and consoling myself for the impossibility of being a true Christian woman on this earth, by the saying of a priest — *There are arrangements with heaven!* Thou hast shown me a vaster sphere, and now I should not have an instant of repose if thou wert to desert me in this pale twilight dawn of truth."

"But I know nothing myself," answered Lemor, sorrowfully. "I am the offspring of the age. I do not possess the science of the future. I can only understand and comment upon the past. Floods of light passed before me, and like all the young and pure of the time, I rushed toward the the broad beams which revealed to us error, without giving us truth. I hate the wrong, I know not the right. I suffer, oh! I suffer, Marcelle, and find only in thee the beautiful ideal which I would fain see rule the earth. Oh! I love thee with all the love which men repulse from their midst, with all the devotion which society paralyzes and refuses to enlighten, with all the tenderness which I cannot communicate to others, with all the charity given me by God for thee and for them, but which thou alone understandest and feelest like myself, when all others are insensible or disdainful. Let us love, then, without corrupting ourselves by mingling with those who triumph, and without degrading ourselves with those who submit. Let us love as two wanderers crossing the seas to conquer a new world, but knowing not whether they shall ever reach it. Let us love, not to be happy in a *twofold selfishness*, as love is called, but to suffer together, to pray together, together to seek what we two, poor birds lost in the storm, may do, day by day, to remove the plague which scatters our race, and to gather under our wings some fugitives crushed like ourselves beneath terror and sadness!"

Lemor wept like a child as he pressed Marcelle to his heart. Marcelle, carried away by burning sympathy and enthusiastic respect, knelt before him as a daughter before her father, saying:

"Save me, let me not perish! Thou wert here just now, thou heardst me consult a man of money upon affairs of money. I have been persuaded to struggle against poverty to save my son from ignorance and moral feebleness; if thou condemnest me, if thou provest to me that my son will be better and greater through poverty, I shall perhaps have the prodigious courage to let his body suffer to fortify his soul!"

"O, Marcelle!" said Lemor, obliging her to reseat herself, and kneeling in his turn before her, "thou hast the strength and the resolution of the greatest saints and proudest martyrs of the past. But where are the baptismal waters, to which we may bear thy child? the church of the poor is not yet builded; they live dispersed, following various inspirations in the absence of all doctrine; some resigned through habit, some idolatrous through stupidity, here ferocious through vengeance, there still degraded by every abandoned and brutish vice. We cannot ask the first passing beggar to lay his hands on thy son and bless him. The beggar has suffered too much to be loving, and is, perhaps, a robber! Let us shelter thy boy from evil as far as possible, let us teach him the love of right and the need of insight. This generation may acquire that insight, and some day, perhaps, instruct us in it. Keep thy wealth; how should I reproach thee with it, when I see that thy heart is entirely indifferent to it, and that thou regardest it but as a trust to be accounted for to heaven? Keep the little gold which remains to thee. As the good miller said the other day, it is purified in some hands, as it is soiled and corrupted in others. Let us love, let us love! and trust that God will enlighten us in His own time. And now, farewell, Marcelle! I see that thou desirest this effort of courage from me. I will make it. To-morrow I will leave this sweet and lovely valley where, notwithstanding everything, I have lived two such happy days! In a year I will return; whether thou art in a palace or a hut, I see that I must bow at thy door, and there hang up forever my pilgrim's staff."

Lemor departed, and, after a few moments, Marcelle quitted the cabin in her turn. But, careful as she was to conceal her retreat, she met face to face at the edge of the enclosure, an ill-looking boy, who, crouched behind the hedge, seemed awaiting her passage. He stared boldly at her, and then, as if delighted at having surprised and recognized her, ran off in the direction of a mill on the Vauvre at the other side of the way. Marcelle did not think his ugly face quite unknown to her, and remembered, after some effort, that it was that of the *patachon* who had lately led her astray in the Black Valley, and deserted her in a swamp. His red head and ill-omened green eye gave her some uneasiness, although she could not imagine what interest this lad could take in watching her proceedings.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FÊTE.

THE miller had returned to the dance, hoping to find Rose free from what he disdainfully called her *raft* of cousins. But Rose was in a pet with her kinsfolk, with the dance, and somewhat with herself. She was remorseful for not feeling the courage to defy the taunts of her family.

Her father had taken her aside that morning.

"Rose," said he, "thy mother has forbidden thee to dance with Grand-Louis of Angibault; now I forbid thee to affront him so. He is a respectable man, incapable of compromising thee; and besides, who could think of coupling your names together? It would be too unsuitable; and, in *these days*, it is not to be supposed that a peasant could think of a girl of thy rank. So dance with him: we should not humiliate our inferiors; some day or other one is sure to have need of them, and they should be attached when it costs nothing."

"But if mamma scold me?" said Rose, at once happy in this permission, and hurt by the motive which dictated it.

"Thy mother will not say anything. I have been lecturing her," replied M. Bricolin. And, in fact, Mme. Bricolin did not say anything. She dared not disobey her lord and master, who connived at her hardness towards others, on the single condition that she should be pliant to him. But as he had not thought proper to initiate her into his views, and she was ignorant of the importance which he attached to preserving the miller's alliance in the diplomatic affair of acquiring the manor of Blanchemont, she had contrived to elude his commands, and her ironical condescension was more vexatious to Grand-Louis than open war.

Annoyed at not seeing Rose, and depending upon the protection of her father, whom he had seen return to the farm, Grand-Louis went there, seeking some pretext to talk with her, and discover the object of her thoughts. But he was much surprised to find in the court M. Bricolin in deep conference with the miller of Blanchemont, whose mill was situated at the foot of the terrace, just opposite Pauline's house. Now, a few days before, M. Bricolin had irrevocably quarrelled with this miller, who had for some time had his custom, and had, according to him, abominably reduced his measure of grain. Whether innocent or guilty, the said miller greatly regretted the loss of the custom of the farm, and swore hatred and revenge upon Grand-Louis. He waited only for an occasion to injure him, and one had just presented itself. The proprietor of his mill was the very M. Ravelard to whom the Miller of Angibault had sold Marcelle's carriage. Proud and pleased to try his new acquisition, and to display it to his retainers, M. Ravelard determined to inspect his property at Blanchemont; but having no servant who knew how to drive two-in-hand, he engaged the talents of the red-headed patachon, who was a hack-driver by trade, and boasted a perfect acquaintance with the roads of the Black Valley. M. Ravelard had arrived, not without trouble, but at least without accident, on the morning of the fête. He sent his horses to his mill, but did not have *his carriage* put up, that everybody might observe it, and know to whom it belonged.

The sight of this fine carriage was already very disagreeable to M. Bricolin, who detested M. Ravelard, his rival in the territorial wealth of the district. He went down to the road by the Vauvre to examine and criticise it. Granchon, the miller, Grand-Louis's rival, entered into conversation with him without seeming to remember their quarrel, and did not fail to worry and taunt him with hints that his master was better able than he to set up his carriage. Thereupon M. Bricolin began to abuse the carriage, to say that it was an old prefect's coach made over, a crazy wagon of a thing, and might not, perhaps, leave the Black Valley in as spruce condition as it had entered it. Granchon defended his landlord's discernment and the quality of his purchase, and finally said that it had been Mme. de Blanchemont's, and that Grand-Louis had been the agent in the sale. M. Bricolin, surprised and scandalized, listened to the details of the affair, and learned that the Miller of Angibault had decided M. Ravelard to secure this luxury, by telling him that it would enrage M. Bricolin. The fact was unhappily too true. M. Ravelard had talked with the patachon all the way in coming. The latter, skilled in eliciting a good gratuity for himself, and seeing the bourgeois intoxicated with pride in his new vehicle, had spoken to him of nothing else. Nothing could be handsomer, lighter, more *pleasant to drive*, than this carriage. It must have cost at least four thousand francs, and was worth twice as much in the country. M. Ravelard, delicately flattered by this artless admiration, had confided all the circumstances of the bargain to his driver, and he had gossiped about them with Granchon the miller, while breakfasting at the mill of Blanchemont. Perceiving the hatred and envy felt there towards Grand-Louis, he set things in their worst light, as much for the pleasure of prating and being listened to as on account of his irritation against Grand-Louis for his unmerciful raillery the day of his adventure in the marsh.

A few moments after M. Bricolin had left Granchon with a bent brow and haughty air, this same Granchon saw Grand-Louis and Marcelle enter Pauline's cabin. He was struck by this seemingly mysterious rendezvous, and racked his brain to find therein a new occasion of injury to his enemy. He placed the patachon in ambush, and after an hour he learned that Grand-Louis, an unknown, who seemed to be a new mill-boy engaged in his service, the young lady of Blanchemont, and M. Tailland, the notary, had been shut up in deep conference at Pauline's; that each had left separately, and taking useless precautions against observation; finally, that some conspiracy was hatching there, some money affair, doubtless, since the notary was concerned in it. Granchon was not unaware that this honest notary was a bugbear and terror to Bricolin. Half guessing the truth, he hastened obligingly to inform Bricolin of all these details, and to compliment him upon the manner in which his favorite, the Miller of Angibault, served his interests. This was the narration which Grand-Louis interrupted on entering the court of the farm.

Under any other circumstances our honest miller would have gone right up to his accuser, and forced him to an explanation. But seeing Bricolin abruptly turn his back upon him, and Granchon slyly watch him with a taunting look, he uneasily wondered what serious business could have brought together two men, who, the evening before, *ne se seraient pas donné un coup de bonnet derrière l'église*, that is to say, would not have bowed had they met face to face in the narrowest street in the town. Grand-Louis did not know the subject of their conversation, nor even whether he were the object of this affected *aside;* but his conscience pricked him. He had tried to outwit M. Bricolin. Instead of scornfully repulsing him when he had offered him money to serve his interest to the injury of Marcelle's, he had pretended to bargain with him for one or two bourrées with Rose; he had given him hope, and to avenge himself for his insulting offers, he had deceived him.

"I deserve no better," thought he, "than to have my fine mine countermined. This is what comes of tricking! My mother always told me it was a country custom which would bring bad luck, and I have not had sense enough to keep from it. If I had shown myself an honest man, as I am at heart, to this cursed farmer, he would have hated, but respected, and perhaps feared, me, more than he will now, if he discover that I have used cunning words with him. Grand-Louis, my friend, thou hast been a fool! All bad actions are stupid — mayst thou not drink thine!"

Tormented, intimidated, and displeased with himself, he went to the terrace to join his mother, and propose to take her back to Angibault. Vespers were over, and she had already gone with some neighbors, leaving word with

Jean for his master to amuse himself awhile longer, but not stay too late.

Grand-Louis could not avail himself of this permission. A prey to a thousand anxieties, he wandered about till sunset without any enjoyment, waiting till Rose should reappear, or till her father should come to inform him of his intentions.

The chief amusement of the villagers on a fête day is towards night. The gendarmes, tired of doing nothing, begin to mount their horses; the people from the town and suburbs climb into their various vehicles and depart, to avoid passing the bad roads by night. The pedlers buckle up their packs, and the curate goes to sup merrily with some brother come to see the dancing, perhaps with a sigh at not being able to take part in the sinful pleasure. The natives thus remain in possession of the ground with such of the musicians as have not made a good day, and recompense themselves by prolonging it. Now all are acquainted, and once in action, they repay themselves for having been scattered, criticised, and perhaps laughed at, by the foreigners; for in the Black Valley all are called foreigners beyond the distance of a league round. Then all the little population of the place begins to dance, even old kinsfolk and friends, who had been timidly withheld by broad daylight; even the fat bar-maid of the cabaret, who has been hard at work since morning serving her customers, and who tucks up her smoky apron, and frisks with superannuated charms; even the little hunch-backed tailor, at whose embrace the girls would have blushed in the daylight, and who says, grinning from ear to ear, that *all cats are gray at night.*

Rose, tired of pouting, felt a new desire for amusement when all her relations had gone. Before returning to the fête, she wished to see the maniac, who had slept all day in Chounette's care. She softly entered the room, and found her awake, sitting upon her bed, her manner pensive, and almost calm. For the first time in a long while Rose dared to touch her hand, and ask her how she did, and for the first time in twelve years the maniac did not withdraw her hand and turn away dis-displeased.

"My dear sister, my sweet Bricoline," repeated Rose, emboldened and rejoiced, "dost thou feel better?"

"I feel well," replied the maniac, shortly. "I have found, on awaking, what I have been looking for these fifty-four years."

"And what wast thou looking for, my darling?"

"I was looking for tenderness!" answered Bricoline, in a strange voice, and mysteriously putting her finger to her lips. "I have sought it everywhere: in the old chateau, in the garden, by the fountain, in the hollow way; above all, in the warren! But it is not there, Rose, and thou seekest it in vain thyself. They have hidden it in a great subterranean place, which is under this house, and it will be found under its ruins. This came to me in sleep, for while I sleep I always think and seek. Be easy, Rose, and let me alone! To-night, no later than to-night, I shall find tenderness, and will share it with thee. Then we shall be rich! *In these days of ours*, as the gendarme, who is placed here to guard us, says, we are so poor that nobody will have us. But to-morrow, Rose, no later than to-morrow, we will both be married; I to Paul, who has become king of Algiers, and thou to that man who brings the sacks of grain, and always looks at thee. I will make him my first minister, and it shall be his business to have this gendarme, who is always saying the same thing, and has made us suffer so much, burnt at a slow fire. But hush! speak to no one of this. It is a great secret, and the fate of the African war depends upon it."

Rose was much frightened at this fantastic address, and dared say no more to her sister, for fear of exciting her yet further. She would not leave her till the physician, who was expected at this hour, should come, and she even forgot her desire to dance, and remained pensively near the maniac's bed, her head drooping, her hands folded in her lap, and her heart filled with deep sadness. The contrast was striking between the two sisters, one so horribly wrecked by suffering, so repulsive in her selfneglect, the other so carefully adorned, so brilliant with freshness and beauty. And yet there was a resemblance in their features, and in the bosom of each smouldered, in different degree, a thwarted love, as they call it in this country — both were sad and grave. The least depressed of the two was the madwoman, who revolved wild projects and hopes in her distracted brain.

The physician came punctually. He examined the patient with the kind of apathy felt by a man who sees nothing to hope, and nothing to attempt in a case long since desperate.

"The pulse is the same," said he ; "there is no change."

"Pardon me, doctor," said Rose, drawing him to one side. "There is a change since yesterday evening. She screams, sleeps, speaks differently from usual. I assure you that there is a revolution in her system. This evening, she endeavors to collect her ideas and to express them, although they are the ideas of delirium ; is this worse or better than her ordinary depression? What do you think of it?"

"I think nothing," answered the doctor. "Everything may be expected in such a disease, and nothing can be foreseen. Your family has been wrong in not making the sacrifices necessary to send her to one of the establishments where the faculty are particularly occupied with exceptional cases. For myself, I never boasted of being able to cure her, and I think that the greatest skill could not answer for it now. It is too late. I only desire that her mania of silence and solitude may not alter into fury. Avoid contradicting her, and do not make her talk, lest her thoughts fix themselves upon one object."

"Alas!" said Rose, "I dare not gainsay you, and yet it is so dreadful to live always alone, a horror to everybody! When at last she seems to seek some sympathy, some pity, must this need of affection be met by frozen silence? Do you know what she just told me? She said that ever since she became crazy (she thinks it is fifty-four years) she has been seeking for tenderness. Poor girl, she has certainly never found it!"

"And did she say this in reasonable terms?"

"Alas, no! She uttered shocking ideas and frightful menaces at the same time."

"You see that these outpourings of delirium are more dangerous than salutary. Trust me, let her alone, and if she wishes to go out, prevent any constraint being put upon her habits. It is the only way to avoid a return of yesterday evening's crisis."

Rose sorrowfully obeyed; but Marcelle, who desired the retirement of her chamber to write, and saw her companion sad and listless, besought her to go and amuse herself, promising that at the first cry, or symptom of agitation in her sister, she would send little Fanchon to inform her. Besides, Mme. Bricolin was also busied in the house, and her grandmother urged Rose to come and dance one bourrée more in her presence before the close of the assembly.

"Remember," said she, "that I count every fête day now, thinking each year that I may not see the next. Let me see thee dance and amuse thyself to-day, or I shall have a sad thought left in my mind, and I shall fancy that will bring me bad luck."

Rose had not taken three steps on the terrace before Grand-Louis was at her side.

"Mlle. Rose," said he, "has your father said anything to you against me?"

"No. On the contrary, he almost commanded me this morning to dance with you."

"But—since this morning?"

"I have scarcely seen him; he has not spoken to me. He seems much occupied with his business."

"Come, Louis," said the grandmother, "thou dost not ask Rose to dance! Dost thou not see that she would like to?"

"Is it true, Mlle. Rose?" said the miller, taking the young girl's hand; "should you fancy dancing again this evening with me?"

"I should like to dance," answered she, with piquant nonchalance.

"If with any other than me," said Grand-Louis, pressing Rose's arm against his agitated heart, "speak: I will go and find him!"

"That means, perhaps, that you could wish it were not you?" replied the roguish girl, stopping.

"You think so?" cried the miller, transported with love. "Ah well! you shall see if my joints are stiffened!"

And he drew, almost carried her to the midst of the dance, where in another moment, both forgetful of their uneasiness and their troubles, they lightly grazed the turf, holding each the other's hand in a little closer pressure than the bourrée absolutely required.

But this rapturous bourrée was not finished when M. Bricolin, who had waited for this moment to render the affront more cutting before all the village, rushed into the very midst of the dancers, and with a gesture interrupting the bagpipe, which would have drowned his voice —

"My daughter!" cried he, taking Rose by the arm, "you are a modest and respectable girl. Never dance again with people whom you do not know!"

"Mlle. Rose is dancing with me, M. Bricolin," replied Grand-Louis, much excited.

"That is the reason that I forbid her, as I forbid you, yourself, ever to take the liberty of asking her, or of addressing a word to her, or ever crossing my threshold, or — "

The farmer's thundering voice was choked by this excess of eloquence, and as he stammered in his rage, Grand-Louis interrupted him.

"M. Bricolin," said he, "you have the right, as a father, to control your daughter; you have the right to forbid me your house; but you have no right to affront me in public before giving me an explanation in private."

"I have a right to do everything I please," retorted Bricolin, exasperated, "and to tell a rascal just what I think of him!"

"To whom do you say that, M. Bricolin?" asked Grand-Louis, his eyes flashing fire; for although he had said to himself, at the beginning of this scene, "Now for it! I have my deserts, to a certain point!" it was impossible for him patiently to submit to insult.

"I say it to whomsoever I think proper," answered Bricolin, with a majestic air, but in reality suddenly intimidated.

"If you are talking to your cap, it matters little to me," returned Grand-Louis, endeavoring to compose himself.

"Just look at this madman!" replied Bricolin, sheltering himself in the inquisitive group that crowded around him; "would not you say that he was about to insult me, because I forbid him to speak to my daughter? Have I not the right to do so?"

"Yes, yes, you have the entire right," said the miller, forcing himself to turn away, "but not without giving me a reason; and I will come to ask you for one when you are cool, and I too."

"Dost thou threaten me, wretch?" cried Bricolin, alarmed, and calling the assembly to witness; "he threatens me!" added he, in an emphatic tone, and as if to claim the assistance of his friends and servants against a dangerous man.

"God forbid, M. Bricolin!" said Grand-Louis, shrugging his shoulders; "you do not hear me —"

"And I will not hear thee. I have nothing to hear from an ungrateful and false friend. Yes," added he, seeing that the miller felt more sorrow than anger at this speech, "I tell thee that thou art a false friend—a Judas!"

"A Judas? no, for I am not a Jew, M. Bricolin."

"I know nothing of that!" returned the farmer, becoming bolder as his adversary seemed to give way.

"Ah! gently, if you please," replied Grand-Louis, in a tone which closed his mouth. "No big words; I respect your age, I respect your mother, and your daughter too, perhaps, more than yourself; but I will not answer for myself if you go too far. I might reply, and show that if I have done a little wrong, you have done a great one. Trust me, let us be silent, M. Bricolin, this might lead us further than we should like. I will come to talk with you, and you will hear me."

"Thou shalt not come! If thou comest I will turn thee out with shame," cried M. Bricolin, when he saw the miller, who was striding away, out of hearing. "Thou art nothing but a wretch, a deceiver, a conspirator."

Rose, who, pale and frozen with terror, had remained till now motionless on her father's arm, was seized with an energetic impulse of which she would not have believed herself capable an instant before.

"Papa," said she, drawing him forcibly from the crowd, "you are angry, and do not think what you are saying. Explanations should be made at home, and not before everybody. You are treating me very inconsiderately, and are not very careful of my reputation."

"Thou, thou!" said the farmer, astonished, and apparently conquered by his daughter's courage. "There is nothing against thee in all this, nothing to hurt thy reputation. I permitted thee to dance with this wretch, it seemed all fair and natural to me, and to everybody else. I did not know that this fellow was a villain, a traitor, a —"

"All you will, father, but this is quite enough," said Rose, shaking his arm with the force of a spoiled child. And she succeeded in drawing him towards the farm.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TWO SISTERS.

MME. BRICOLIN did not expect to see her family return so soon. Her husband had left her at home without telling her the outrage which he purposed. He would not have the majesty of his public performance injured by her shrill outcries. So that when she saw him enter, scarlet with anger, panting, growling between his teeth, and dragging on his arm Rose, also much excited and distressed, and her eyes swollen with irrepressible tears, while her grandmother pattered after them, her hands clasped in consternation, she drew back with surprise; then, raising her candle to their faces —

"What is to pay?" said she; "what has happened now?

"That my son is much in the wrong, and talks unreasonably," answered Mother Bricolin, letting herself fall into a chair.

"Yes, yes, it is the same story as yesterday evening," said the farmer, recovering part of his anger with the sight of his wife. "Enough said! Is supper ready? Come, Rose, art thou hungry?"

"No, father," said Rose, dryly.

"Is it I who have taken away thy appetite?"

"Yes, father."

"Is that a reproach?"

"Yes, father, I own that it is."

"Come now, Rose," said the farmer, who was ready to treat his daughter with all possible condescension, but saw her for the first time somewhat rebellious towards him, "thy behavior does not quite suit me. Dost thou know what thy ill-humor might make me think? Thou wouldst not hear, I hope?"

"Speak, speak, father! Say what you think; if you are mistaken, it is my duty to justify myself."

"I say, my daughter, that it would be ill done for thee to take the part of this workman of a miller, on whose back I will break my rattan some one of these fine mornings, if he prowls around my house."

"Father," replied Rose with warmth, "I will venture to tell you, should you break your stick over my own back, that all this is cruel and unjust, that I am mortified by being instrumental to your public vengeance, as if I were responsible for all the wrongs that have or have not been committed towards you; that, in short, it all pains me, and wounds my grandmother, as you plainly see."

"Yes, yes, it troubles me and vexes me," said Mother Bricolin, in the quick, short tone which nevertheless concealed great gentleness and kindness (and it was in this quickness of speech and tenderness of heart that Rose resembled her). "My heart bleeds," continued the old woman, "to hear such hard words given to an honest lad, whom I love like one of my own children, and the more that for sixty years I have been friends with his mother and all his family — ay, and a family of fine people! And Grand-Louis will bring no dishonor upon them!"

"Oho! so it is on this fine gentleman's account," said Mme. Bricolin to her husband, "that your mother is scolding, and your daughter in tears? Look at her there, all weeping! Yes, indeed! You have brought things to a pretty pass, M. Bricolin, with your friendship for this great booby! You are well paid for it! See if it be not a shame to have your mother and daughter take his part against you, and cry about it as if — as if — Blessed saints! I will not say what, I should blush!"

"Say anything, mother! Speak!" cried Rose, completely irritated. "Since you have so well begun to mortify me to-day, refuse yourselves nothing! I am quite ready seriously and sincerely to answer any questions upon my sentiments toward Grand-Louis."

"And what are your sentiments, mademoiselle?" said the enraged farmer, in his roughest voice; "tell us at once, so please you, since your tongue itches."

"My sentiments are those of a sister and a friend!" answered Rose; "and no one shall make me change them."

"A sister! a miller's sister!" said M. Bricolin, chuckling, and imitating Rose's tone; "a friend! a peasant's friend! Fine language, and very suitable for a girl like you! Thunder crush me if the young girls are not all crazy, nowadays. Rose, you talk as one of the people might in a mad-house!"

At this moment, piercing shrieks were heard from the maniac's apartment; Mme. Bricolin started, and Rose turned pale as death.

"Listen, father!" said she, seizing M. Bricolin's arm; "hear that, and then dare to laugh at the insanity of young girls! Jest upon mad-houses, you who seem to forget that a girl of *our rank* may love a man without fortune, enough to fall into a state worse than death!"

"Then she confesses it, she proclaims it!" cried Mme. Bricolin, divided between rage and despair; "she loves this laborer, and threatens us to be like her sister!"

"Rose! Rose!" cried M. Bricolin, shocked, "be silent! and you, Thibaude," he added imperiously, "go and see Bricoline."

Mme. Bricolin left the room. Rose remained standing, her face convulsed, frightened at what she had just said to her father.

"My daughter, thou art ill," said M. Bricolin, much moved. "Thou must recover thy senses."

"Yes, you are right, father, I am ill," said Rose, bursting into tears, and throwing herself into her father's arms.

M. Bricolin had been alarmed, but it was impossible to melt him. He embraced Rose as one would coax a child, not soothe an adored daughter. He was proud of her beauty, her wit, and still more of the wealth with which he would fain crown her. He would have preferred bringing her into the world ugly and stupid, but exciting envy by her riches, than perfect and poor, and inspiring pity.

"Little one," said he to her, "thou hast not common sense this evening. Go to thy bed, and do not think of this miller and your fine friendships. His sister nursed thee, to be sure; but, zounds! she was well paid. This lad was thy playmate when you were children, to be sure again; but he was our servant, and only did his duty in amusing thee. It is my pleasure to dismiss him to-day because he has played me a vile trick; it is thy duty to think me right."

"Oh, father!" said Rose, still weeping in the farmer's arms, "you will revoke that command. You will permit him to justify himself, for he is not guilty, it is impossible, and you will not compel me to mortify my old friend, the son of the good mill-dame who loves me so!"

"Rose, all this begins to be very disagreeable to me," replied Bricolin, extricating himself from his daughter's caresses. "It is too absurd that a family affair should be made of the expulsion of such a vagabond. Come, prithee, grant me peace! Hear how thy poor sister screams, and do not concern thyself so much with a stranger, when distress is in our household."

"Oh, if you think I do not hear my sister's voice," said Rose, with a fearful expression, "if you think that her cries speak nothing to my soul, you are mistaken, father! I do indeed hear them, and think of them only too much!"

Rose went out tottering, but as she turned towards her sister's chamber, they heard her fall upon the corridor floor. The two women, terrified, ran to her. She had fainted, and lay like one dead.

They hastily carried her into her chamber, where Marcelle was writing, and waiting for her, little suspecting the storm that her poor friend had passed through. She lavished the tenderest cares upon her, and was the only one who had the presence of mind to send to the village and see if the physician were yet there. He came, and found the young girl in a violent nervous paroxysm. Her limbs were stiffened, her teeth clenched, and her lips livid. She was restored to consciousness through his exertions, but her pulse passed from its fearful pause to a burning energy. Her large black eyes shone with fever, and she talked hurriedly without knowing to whom she spoke. Struck by hearing her several times successively pronounce the name of Grand-Louis, Marcelle contrived to send away her frightened parents, and to remain alone with her, while the physician went to the elder sister, who began to exhibit the same symptoms of fury as the evening before.

"Dear Rose," said Marcelle, pressing her companion to her heart, "you have some trouble that causes your illness. Be calm, to-morrow you shall tell me all about it, and I will do anything in the world to relieve your suffering. Who knows but I may find some way?"

"Ah! you are an angel!" answered Rose, falling upon her neck. "But you can do nothing for me. All is lost, all is broken. Louis is driven from the house; my father protected him this morning, and hates and curses him this evening. I am, indeed, too wretched!"

"You really love him, then?" said Marcelle, astonished.

"Do I love him?" cried Rose. "Can I help loving him? And when did you doubt it?"

"Even yesterday, Rose, you would not confess it."

"It is possible I might never have confessed it if they had not persecuted me, driven me to extremity, as they have to-day. Conceive it," said she, speaking rapidly, and holding her burning brow with both hands, "they tried to humiliate him before me, to degrade him in my eyes because he is poor, and dares love me! This morning, when they overpowered him with their mockeries, I was cowardly; I was angry, and dared not show it. I let them belie him without venturing to defend him; I almost blushed for him. And then I came home with a violent headache, asking myself if I could ever have the strength to brave such insults for his sake. I imagined that I would love him no more, and then it seemed to me that I was going to die, and that this house, which always looked beautiful to me, because I was brought up here and was happy in it, became dark, dirty, forlorn and ugly, as it doubtless looks to you. I thought myself in a prison; and this evening, when my poor sister told me in her madness that our father was a gendarme who kept us in sight to inflict suffering on us, for an instant I, too, was as if mad, and seemed to see all that my sister saw. Oh! how that pained me! And when I recovered my reason, I felt indeed that without my poor Louis, life would have nothing agreeable or endurable for me. It is through my love for him that I have met all my troubles gayly till to-day: my mother's dreadful temper, my father's insensibility, the burden of our wealth, which creates only misery and jealousy around us, and the spectacle of the terrible calamities by which my sister and my grandfather have been long stricken under my eyes. All this was hideous to me when I saw myself alone, not daring to love, and forced to endure it all without the consolation of being beloved by a noble, beautiful, excellent being, whose attachment indemnified me for everything. Oh! it is impossible! I love him; I will try no longer to overcome it. But it will kill me, see you, Mme. Marcelle; for they have driven him away, and, much as I may suffer, they will be pitiless. I can never see him more; if I speak with him secretly, they will scold me and mock me till my brain will turn — My poor head that I thought so well and strong, and that aches now so that it seems as if it would break — Oh, I will not let myself become like my sister, do not fear for me, my dear Mme. Marcelle! I will sooner kill myself if I feel that her malady gains on me — but it will not gain, will it? — Yet when I hear her cry, it rends my heart, it runs like ice and fire through my veins. A sister, a poor sister! her blood is the same as mine, and her anguish is felt in my body as in my soul! Oh, heaven! madam! O my God! do you hear her? Hark! though they may shut the doors, I hear her still, I hear her always! — how she suffers, how she loves, how she calls! my sister, oh! my poor darling, who was so beautiful, so sensible, gentle and gay, and now she howls like a wild beast — "

The poor girl's voice was lost in sobs, and her weeping, long repressed by a violent effort of her will, gradually became inarticulate cries, then piercing shrieks. Her face changed, her wandering eyes grew sunken and dim, her clenched hands grasped Marcelle's arms so as to bruise them, and she finally hid her face in the pillow, uttering heart-rending cries, and imitating, by a fatal and irresistible instinct, the screams of her unfortunate sister.

Startled by this lamentable echo, the family left the elder for the younger sister. The physician came, and learning what had taken place, did not attribute this violent nervous attack simply to the effect produced upon Rose's imagination by the insanity of her sister. He succeeded in soothing her, but when he was again alone with the Bricolins, he spoke to them with some severity on the subject. "You have been long imprudent," said he to them, "to bring up this young girl in the presence of so melancholy a spectacle. It would be judicious to withdraw her from it, to send the elder to an asylum for the insane, and to marry the younger, in order to dissipate the melancholy which might easily grow upon her."

"How now, M. Lavergne!" said Mme. Bricolin; "certainly, we only desire to marry her. She has had plenty of chances, and, only to-day, here was her cousin Honoré, who is an excellent match; he is sure to have a hundred thousand crowns. If she were willing, he and we would ask no better; but she will not hear it spoken of; she refuses all whom we propose to her!"

"Perhaps because you do not propose the one who pleases her," replied the doctor. "I know nothing about it, and do not interfere in your affairs; but you are well aware of the cause of the other's misfortune, and I strongly advise you to take a different course with this one."

"Oh! this one!" said M. Bricolin, "it would be too great a pity, such a handsome girl, eh! doctor?"

"The other was handsome too; you do not remember it!"

"But in short, sir," said Mme. Bricolin, more irritated than impressed by the doctor's frankness, "do you really think that my daughter's brain is diseased? Her sister's misfortune was an accident, arising from her grief at the death of her lover — "

"Whom you did not allow her to marry!"

"Sir, you know nothing about it. Perhaps we might have allowed her, if we had known it would turn out so badly. But Rose, sir, is a girl of good constitution, and very rational, and, thank God, this is not a hereditary disease with us. There never was anybody mad that I knew of in the Bricolin or Thibault families! My own head is always cool and clear; my other daughters are like me; I cannot conceive why Rose should not be as well made as the rest."

"You will think as you please," returned the physician, "but I declare to you that you play a bold game if ever you thwart your youngest daughter's inclinations. She has a fine temperament, but nervous, and very similar to her sister's. Besides, insanity, if not hereditary, is contagious — "

"Oh! we will send the other to an asylum, we will decide upon that at any cost," said Mme. Bricolin.

"And Rose must not be vexed, dost hear, wife?" said the farmer, pouring down glass after glass of wine to dull the sense of his domestic troubles. "There are actors at La Châtre, we must take her to see the play. We will buy her a new gown; two, if need be. Zounds! we have enough to refuse her nothing!— "

M. Bricolin was interrupted by Mme. de Blanchemont who desired a private interview with him.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CONTRACT.

"M. BRICOLIN," said Marcelle, following the farmer into a sort of dark and disorderly closet, where he kept his papers heaped up pell-mell, with various agricultural implements and specimens of seeds, "are you prepared to listen to me calmly and gently?"

The farmer had drunk deeply, to fortify himself before going to insult Grand-Louis on the terrace. On returning, he had drunk still more to compose and refresh himself. In the third place he had drunk to dissipate the melancholy that hung over the house, and drive away the dark thoughts that beset him. His blue-flowered china mug, which always stood on the kitchen table, usually served him as support or stimulus against the first weight of intoxication. When he found himself alone with the lady of Blanchemont, and deprived of the assistance of his white wine, he was ill at ease, mechanically felt upon his writing-table for the glass which was not there, and, endeavoring to offer a chair, threw down two. Marcelle then perceived that his legs, his red face, his tongue and his brain were all under the influence of wine, and notwithstanding the disgust with which this new feature in his character inspired her, she resolved to enter into an open explanation with him, remembering the proverb *in vino veritas.*

Seeing that he had scarcely heard her first words, she returned to the attack.

"M. Bricolin," said she, "I had the pleasure of asking you whether you were prepared to listen with composure and kindness to a rather delicate question I have to put to you."

"What is it, madam?" replied the farmer, in an ungracious, but inefficient tone. Much as he was vexed with Marcelle, he was too much stupefied to testify it.

"It is this, M. Bricolin," returned she; "that you have forbidden the Miller of Angibault your house, and I should like to know the cause of your displeasure with him."

Bricolin was confounded at this frank manner of broaching the subject. There was a bold sincerity in Marcelle's bearing which always constrained him, and especially now, when he had not the free exercise of his faculties. Controlled by a will superior to his own, he did the contrary of what he would have done if sober — he told the truth.

"You know, madam," he answered, "the cause of my displeasure. I have no need to tell you."

"It is I, then?" said Mme. de Blanchemont.

"You? no. I do not accuse you. You simply attend to your own interests, as I do to mine — but I call it a rascally trick to pretend to be my friend, and to go at the same time and give you advice against me. Hear it, use it, pay well for it, you will not fail to get it. But as for me, I turn out the enemy who injures me with you. There now! And so much the worse for those who do not like it! I am master in my own house; for in short, see you, Mme. de Blanchemont, I tell you, each one for himself. Your interests are your own, my interests are my own.. A rascal is a rascal. In *these days of ours*, every one thinks of himself. I am master in my house and in my family, you have your interests as I have mine; as for advice against me, it will not be missing, I tell you —"

And M. Bricolin thus went on during ten minutes, tediously repeating himself without perceiving it, and losing at each word the remembrance of having said the same thing an hundred times before.

Marcelle, who had rarely been near a drunken person, and never talked with one, listened to him with astonishment, questioning within herself whether he had not suddenly become idiotic, and thinking with terror that the fate of Rose and her lover depended on a man who was hard and obstinate when sober, and deaf and stupid when his rudeness was softened by wine. She let him maunder through the same ignoble commonplaces for some time, then, seeing that this might last till he fell asleep in his chair, she attempted to sober him by abruptly striking the most tender chord.

"Let us see, M. Bricolin," said she, interrupting him, "you positively wish to buy Blanchemont? And if I should accept the price you offer me, would you still be angry?"

Bricolin made an effort to raise his bloodshot lids, and look steadily at Marcelle, who, on her part, looked firmly and attentively at him. Gradually the farmer's eye brightened, his heavy and swollen face appeared to gather solidity, and it seemed as if a veil fell from before his features. He rose and took two or three turns through the room, as if to prove his legs and collect his ideas. He feared it was all a dream. When he again sat down opposite Marcelle, his attitude was firm, and his complexion almost pale.

"Pardon me, my lady baroness," said he, "what did you do me the honor to say to me?"

"I say," resumed Marcelle, "that I am disposed to give you my estate for 250,000 francs, if — "

"If what?" asked Bricolin, in a hasty voice, and with a lynx glance.

"If you will promise me not to make your daughter unhappy."

"My daughter! What has my daughter to do with all this?"

"Your daughter loves the Miller of Angibault; she is very sick; she may lose her reason by it, like her sister. Do you hear, do you understand, M. Bricolin?"

"I hear, but I understand nothing. I see that my daughter has taken some love fancy into her head. It will pass off in a day or two, as it has come. But what great interest do you take in my daughter?"

"What matters it to you? Since you do not understand how one may feel friendship and compassion for a lovely and suffering girl, at least you comprehend the advantages of being proprietor of Blanchemont?"

"This is a jest, my lady baroness. You are mocking me. You have spoken to-day with my greatest enemy, Tailland the notary, who would certainly have counselled you to keep me up to the mark."

"Without any animosity toward you, he gave me the information necessary in my position. Now, I know that I could very soon find a purchaser, and, as you say, keep you up to the mark."

"And it was the Miller of Angibault who procured you this good counsellor all in secret from me!"

"What do you know about it? You may be mistaken. Besides, all explanation on this subject is useless; if I am satisfied with your offer, what matters the rest to you?"

"But the rest — the rest — must my daughter marry a miller?"

"Your father was one before taking the place of far mer with my family."

"But he made money, and *in these days* I am in a situation to have a son-in-law who would assist me in buying your estate."

"In buying it at 300,000 francs, and perhaps more?"

"Is it, then, an absolute condition? You wish this miller to marry my daughter? What interest have you in it?"

"I told you — friendship, the pleasure of making others happy: things which appear fanciful to you; but each one according to his character."

"I know very well that your husband, the late baron, would have given ten thousand francs for a bad horse, or forty thousand for a bad girl, when the fancy took him — the nobility have such caprices — and one can conceive it, it was for himself, and gave him pleasure; but making a sacrifice purely for the pleasure of others, of people who have no claim on you, whom you scarcely know — "

"Then you advise me not to do it?"

"I advise you," said Bricolin, hastily, frightened at his awkwardness, "to do what you please! There is no disputing tastes and ideas; but yet! — "

"But yet you distrust me, it is plain. Do you not believe me sincere in my proposition?"

"Faith, madam! what security should I have? This is a queenly fancy, which might leave you at any moment."

"For that reason you ought to be speedy in taking me at my word."

"Zounds! she is right!" said Bricolin to himself; "in her madness she is cooler than I. Let us see, my lady baroness," said he aloud, "what security would you give me?"

"A written engagement."

"Signed?"

"Certainly."

"And I must promise to give my daughter in marriage to your protégé?"

"You will give me first your word of honor."

"My word of honor? And then?"

"And then you will go immediately, in presence of your mother, your wife and me, to give it to Rose."

"My word of honor? Is Rose, then, desperately in love?"

"Do you finally consent?"

"If it needs only that to please the child!"

"It needs more."

"What then?"

"You must keep your word."

The farmer changed countenance.

"Keep my word — keep my word!" said he; "do you doubt it, then?"

"No more than you doubt mine; but as you require a written bond from me, so do I require one from you."

"What sort of bond?"

"A promise of marriage, which I will myself draw up, and which shall be signed by Rose and yourself."

"And if, after all this, Rose should claim a dowry from me?"

"She shall renounce it by the bond."

"This would be famously economical," thought the farmer. "That devilish dowry which I might any day have been called upon for, might have hindered my buying Blanchemont. To give no dowry, and have Blanchemont for 250,000 francs, is a profit of 100,000 francs. Come, it is not worth while to haggle. Then, too, if Rose went crazy, we must give up all thought of a son-in-law — and pay a doctor, too, by the year. — And then again, it is too sad; it would give me too much pain to see her growing ugly and dirty like her sister. Two crazy daughters would be a disgrace to us. The girl will have a queer establishment, but the manor of Blanchemont will gild over many things. We shall be laughed at on one side, but envied on the other. Come! I will be a kind father. It is not a bad business."

"My lady baroness," said he, aloud, "suppose we see how such a writing could be turned! It is an odd bargain, however, and I have never seen anything to pattern it by."

"Nor I," answered Mme. de Blanchemont, "and I do not know whether such are to be found in modern legislation. But what matter? With good sense and integrity, you know a deed may be drawn up more valid than any lawyer's."

"That is daily seen: a will, for example. Even the stamped paper is unnecessary. But I have some here. I always keep some. One should always have it at hand."

"Let me make a rough draft upon common paper, M. Bricolin, and do you make another. Then we can compare them, discuss them if necessary, and copy upon stamped paper."

"Do so, do so, madam!" replied Bricolin, who scarcely knew how to write. "You are quicker than I, you will turn it better than I could, and then we will see."

While Marcelle was writing, M. Bricolin went to a jug of water in a corner, and, without being observed, rested it upon a shelf, stooped and swallowed a large quantity. "One needs his brains in such a case," thought he; "it seems to me that mine are all right again, but it is a good thing in business to have cold water in one's blood, it makes one prudent and cautious."

Marcelle, inspired by feeling, and gifted, besides, with great precision of thought in her generous resolutions, drew up a writing which a lawyer might have confessed a masterpiece of clearness, although it was written in good French, did not contain a word of consecrated slang, and bore the impress of the most admirable good faith. When Bricolin heard it read, he was struck with the precision of a deed which, although not of his own dictation, had a value and consequences which he fully comprehended.

"The devil is in the women!" thought he. "It may well be said, that when they chance to understand business, they go far beyond the sharpest of us! I know that when I consult my wife, she always perceives everything that can leave open a door to my advantage or detriment. I wish she were here! But she would delay us with her objections. We will see about it when it comes to signing. Yet who could have believed that this young lady, who is a novel reader, a republican, and an enthusiast, was capable of carrying out her mad freak so wisely? My brain turns with amazement. Let us have another glass of water. Pah! how bad it is! How much good wine I must drink after the bargain, to settle my stomach!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN AFTER-THOUGHT.

THAT appears to me unobjectionable," said M. Bricolin, after attentively listening to a second and third reading of the deed, and following with his eyes, which grew wider and brighter at every line, the text which Marcelle held before them. "There is only one little thing that I would wish to correct: the price, Mme. Marcelle; it is truly too dear by 20,000 francs. I did not reflect at first how much injury my daughter's marriage with this miller might do me. People will say that I am ruined, since I establish her so miserably. It will destroy my credit. And then the lad has nothing to buy her wedding presents with. There is another outlay of 8,000 or 10,000 francs, which will come upon me. Rose cannot do without a handsome trousseau—I am sure she depends upon it!"

"And I am sure she does not depend on it," said Marcelle. "Listen, M. Bricolin, she is crying! Do you hear her?"

"I do not hear her, madam; I think you are mistaken."

"I am not mistaken," said Marcelle, opening the door; "she suffers, she sobs, and her sister screams! How, sir, do you hesitate? You are offered the means of enriching yourself, and, at the same time, of restoring her health, her reason, perhaps her life; and at such a moment, you think of bettering your bargain! Verily!" added she, with indignation, "you are not a man; you have no feeling! Beware, lest I retract, and abandon you to the calamities which weigh upon your family as a punishment for your avarice!"

The only thing in this vehement sally that the farmer clearly understood, was the threat of breaking off the bargain.

"Come, madam," said he, "give me 10,000 francs, and all is settled."

"Adieu!" said Marcelle. "I am going to see Rose. Make your reflections, mine are made; I will make no change in my conditions. I have a son; and I do not forget that, while thinking of others, I must not sacrifice him!"

"Pray sit down again, Mme. Marcelle, and let us leave poor Rose to sleep. She is so ill!"

"Then go yourself to see her!" said Marcelle, warmly, "and convince yourself that she is not asleep. Perhaps the sight of her suffering will make you remember that you are her father."

"I do remember it," said Bricolin, alarmed by the thought that Marcelle might change her mind if he gave her time for reflection. "Come, madam, let us finish up this deed, that we may cure Rose with the news!"

"I hope, sir, that you will plainly and simply give her your consent, and that she may never know that I bought it from you."

"You do not wish her to know that it is a condition between us? I am content! Then it is unnecessary for her to sign the writing."

"Pardon me; she shall sign it without well understanding it. It shall be a sort of dower that I give to her betrothed."

"That comes to the same thing. But it is all one to me; Rose has sense enough to understand that I would not marry her so poorly without making sure of some future advantage from it. But the payment, Mme. Marcelle; do you insist upon having it cash?"

"You told me that you were prepared."

"Doubtless I am! I have just sold a large farm, which was too far from my eye, and I received a week ago the entire payment for it, which is a rare thing with us; but it was a great lord who bought it, and such people always have full coffers. It was a peer of France, my lord duke of * * *, who wanted to make a park of a certain shape, and as my land precisely suited him, I sold it dear, as was just!"

"No matter; you have the money?"

"I have it in my pocket-book, in fine bank-notes," said Bricolin, lowering his voice. "I will show them to you, to make you quite easy."

And after having bolted the doors, he drew from his girdle a huge pocket-book of greasy, shining leather, in which were stuffed a quantity of notes upon the Bank of France. Astonished at the indifference with which Marcelle counted them, "Oh!" said he, "it is frightful to have so much money at once! Happily there are no more *chauffeurs*, and one can venture to keep it uninvested for a few days. I carry it upon my person all day, and at night I put it under my pillow, and sleep upon it. I am so anxious to be rid of it! If I had not had immediate business with you, I should have bought an iron box to keep it in, for I am no such fool as to confide it to notaries or bankers! So I wish we might conclude our bargain this evening, that I need no longer guard this treasure."

"I hope, indeed, that we may conclude it at once," said Marcelle.

"How, then, without any consultation? and my wife? and my notary?"

"Your wife is here; as for your notary, if you send for him, I must also summon mine."

"Trust me, madam, these devilish notaries will ruin everything! I am as wise as they, and you also, for our deed is good, and if we have it registered, it will be devilishly expensive."

"Then let us do without this form. I will sell to you, as they say, from hand to hand."

"Such an important bargain! it makes one tremble! But this is only a promise, after all; suppose we sign it?"

"This promise is as good as a deed. I am ready to sign it. Go and find your wife."

"It must be so," said Bricolin to himself. "If only we do not lose time, and the wind does not change during the hour's dispute that Thibaude will perhaps keep up. You are going to see Rose, Mme. Marcelle? Do not tell her anything yet."

"I shall take good care not to do so! But you permit me to give her some hope of your consent?"

"As things stand now, that may be," answered Bricolin, sagaciously, considering that the sight of Rose and her tears was the best means of holding Marcelle firm to her generous intentions.

M. Bricolin found his wife in a very different disposition from what he had foreseen. Mme. Bricolin was harsh and shrewish; but although more grasping than her husband in the details of life, she was perhaps less avaricious as to the whole; sharper in words, more unfeeling in appearance, yet a good occasional impulse was less foreign to her character than to his. Besides, she was a woman; and the maternal sentiment, though hidden under rude forms, was still living in her bosom.

"M. Bricolin," said she, coming to meet him, and drawing him into the kitchen, where a wretched candle was faintly burning, "thou findest me in trouble. Rose is worse than thou thinkest. She does nothing but cry and sob, as if she were distracted. She is in love with this miller; it is a punishment from Heaven for our sins But the mischief is done, her heart is lost, and she is just as her sister was when she began to break up. Then again, the state of the other grows worse, and threatens to become intolerable. She has tried to break the doors, and the doctor has just ordered us to let her go out and wander about the old chateau and the warren, as usual. He says that she is used to being alone, and in constant motion, and that if we keep her shut up with people about her, she will become furious. But I tremble lest she should kill herself! She seems so evil-minded to-night! She, who never speaks, has been telling us every horrible thing in the world. My stomach actually turned to hear her. It is abominable to live so! And then to think that a cross in love was the cause of all! Yet we brought up all our daughters equally well. The others have married as we wished; they do us honor; they are rich, and have sense enough to think themselves happy, although their husbands are not so very sentimental. But the eldest and youngest are iron-headed; and since we have been so unlucky as not to understand what would ruin the one, we ought to have the prudence not to thwart the other. I had rather she had never been born than to have her marry this miller! But she will have him, and as I had rather see her dead than crazed, we must do the best we can. So I tell thee, Monsieur Bricolin, I give my consent, and thou must needs give thine. I have just told Rose that if she absolutely desires to marry the man, I would not prevent her. That seemed to calm her, though she did not look as if she understood or believed me. Thou must go, too, and tell her the same thing."

"How things happen!" cried Bricolin, delighted. "Here, wife, read this bit of writing, and tell me if anything is wanting."

"I fall from the clouds!" said the dame, when she had perused the paper. And, after various exclamations, she collected all the energies of her will to read it again with the keen attention of an attorney. "This writing is good for thee," said she, "good as a decision in court. Thou hast no need of consultation, M. Bricolin; thou hast only to sign. It is clear profit, clear good fortune! Our business is settled, and Rose will be content. They may well say that the good God always rewards a good intention. I had decided to give her to her lover for nothing, and here we are well paid! Sign, sign, my old man, and pay. That will be carrying the deed into execution, and there can be no drawing back."

"Pay already? so on a sudden! upon a scrap of paper which is not even witnessed?"

"Pay, I tell thee! and have the banns published to-morrow morning."

"But if the child should listen to reason! Perhaps she will be well to-morrow, and will consent to marry somebody else, if we talk to her, and if thou knowest how to coax her. Then people might say that such a deed was folly in me, a piece of stupidity which could not bind my daughter — "

"Well! then the sale would be annulled."

"Not so sure! one can always go to law."

"Thou wouldst lose!"

"Not so sure again! Besides, what matter is it? The sale would be suspended. A lawsuit may be made very long. Thou knowest that Mme. de Blanchemont cannot wait. She will be forced to compromise."

"Bah! such stories make one ill-spoken of, Monsieur Bricolin. One loses honor and credit. It is always profitable to act squarely."

"Well, well, we shall see, Thibaude! Go and tell thy daughter that it is settled. Perhaps when she feels herself no longer thwarted, she will not care so much for her Grand-Louis; for it seemed to me that it was simply the *miff* between her and me which troubled her head so. But say, now! the miller has not ill-manœuvred in this affair! He has found means to secure the friendship and protection of this lady, I don't know how — the lad is no fool!"

"I shall detest him all my life!" replied the farmer's wife; "but it is all one. Provided that Rose will not become like her sister, I will hold my tongue, and content myself with turning a cold shoulder to her husband."

"Oh! her husband, her husband! He is not so yet!"

"All the same, Bricolin. It is a settled thing. Go sign."

"And thou? thou must sign too!"

"I am ready."

Mme. Bricolin deliberately entered her daughter's room, where Marcelle was awaiting her, and signed, with her husband, upon a corner of the bureau.

When this was done, Bricolin, with a look of savage triumph, said in a low voice to his wife:

"Thibaude! the sale is good, and the condition is null! Thou didst not know that, thou who thinkest thou knowest everything!"

Rose was still feverish, and suffering from violent headache; but her nerves were more calm since the maniac was out of the house and her cries were no longer heard. When Marcelle had signed, she gave the pen to her young friend, who was with difficulty made to understand what was going on; but when she comprehended it, she burst into tears, and threw herself affectionately into the arms of her father, her mother, and her friend, whispering to the latter —

"Divine Marcelle, I accept it as a loan. Some day I shall be rich enough to repay it to your son."

The grandmother was the only one of the family who appreciated the nobleness of Marcelle's conduct. She knelt before her, and embraced her knees in silence.

"And now," said Marcelle, in an under voice, to the old woman, "it is not very late, only ten o'clock! Grand-Louis may be even now upon the terrace, and besides, it is not so very far from here to Angibault. Suppose that some one were sent for him? I dare not propose it, but he might be brought here, as if by chance; and once here, he could easily be informed of his happiness."

"I will see to it!" cried the old woman, "if I should have to go myself to the mill! I shall be as active as at fifteen, for that!"

She went, in fact, to the village, but did not find the miller. She would have despatched one of the farm-boys for him, but they were all incapable of stirring from their drunken sleep in their beds, or at the cabaret. Little Fanchon was too much of a coward to go alone at night, and, besides, it would have been inhuman to expose the child on a fête-day evening, to encounters with all sorts of people. Mother Bricolin went to and fro upon the almost deserted terrace, seeking some one sufficiently sober and prudent to intrust with her commission, when her eyes fell upon Uncle Cadoche, coming out of the church porch, where he had been muttering a final prayer.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PATACHON.

"YOU are walking late, Mme. Bricolin," said the mendicant; "you seem to be looking for some one? Your granddaughter went home some time ago. Her papa vexed her preciously to-day!"

"All good, all good, Cadoche," answered the old woman; "I have no money with me. But I believe they gave thee some to-day, at our house."

"I ask nothing of you, my day is completed. I have drank three glasses to-night, and walk only the straighter. Look you, Mother Bricolin, neither your husband, nor the big gentleman, your son, can carry drink as I do at my age. I wish you good-evening. I am going over to Angibault to sleep."

"To Angibault? My old Cadoche, art thou going to Angibault?"

"Do you wonder at that? My house is two long leagues from here, towards Jeu-les-Bois. There is no need of my tiring myself. I am going to pass the night with my nephew the miller; they always receive me well there, and do not put me in the straw, as at other houses; yours, for example, where you nevertheless are rich enough still, notwithstanding the chauffeurs! At my nephew's there is a bed for me in the mill, and they are not afraid of my setting it on fire, — as at your house, where there is always fire in the head, if not at the feet!"

These allusions to the catastrophe of which her husband had been the victim, sent a shudder through Mother Bricolin's old blood; but she made an effort to think only of her granddaughter, and of better days.

"So thou art going to Grand-Louis's, then?" said she to the old man.

"To be sure, to the best of my nephews, my true nephew, my future heir!"

"See here, then, Cadoche; since thou hast thy senses about thee, and art such a friend to Grand-Louis, thou canst render him a famous service. I have some pressing business with him, and he must come immediately to speak with me. Tell him so, and that I will wait for him at the great yard gate. Let him take his mare, he will come the quicker."

"His mare? he has none. She has been stolen."

"Let him come all the same, no matter how! the business is very important to him."

"And what is this business?"

"Good, now! he would have it explained this minute! Cadoche, there shall be a new twenty-sous piece for thee, if thou comest for it to-morrow morning."

"At what hour?"

"When thou wilt."

"I will come at seven. Be ready, because I do not like to wait."

"Go, then!"

"I am going. I shall not be three-quarters of an hour. Ah, my legs are better than your husband's, Mother Bricolin, and yet I am ten years the oldest."

The beggar started, indeed, with a firm step. He was near Angibault, when, in a narrow part of the road, he was overtaken by M. Ravelard's carriage, driven in full splendor by the red-headed and evil-minded patachon, who scorned to cry "take care!" and urged his horses upon him.

It is beneath the dignity of the peasant of Berri ever to turn aside for a vehicle, whatever warning he receive, or whatever difficulty there may be in turning out for him. Uncle Cadoche was prouder than any other man whomsoever in the country. Accustomed, with droll gravity, to treat all those to whom he extended a supplicating hand as his unquestioned inferiors, he now affected to slacken his pace, and to keep the middle of the road.

although he felt the hot breath of the horses upon his shoulder. "Make way, stupid!" at length cried the patachon, accompanying his words with a heavy swing of his whip around the old man's head.

The mendicant turned, and, seizing the heads of the horses, made them recoil so suddenly, that the carriage was nearly overturned in the ditch. Then began a desperate struggle between him and the furious patachon, the latter striking with his whip, and uttering a thousand imprecations, the former guarding himself from his attempts by stooping under the horses' heads, and continually pressing them by forcibly shaking the bits, now forcing them back, now obliged to fall back before them. M. Ravelard assumed, at first, the air of a grandee, as became a man driving for the first time in his own carriage. He himself swore at the insolence of the interruption; but his good Berrichon heart soon overpowering the pride of the parvenu, when he saw that the old man was madly braving real danger, he leant from the carriage and said to the patachon, "Take care, take care not to hurt this poor man!"

It was too late; the horses, maddened by being beaten on the one side and restrained on the other, made a furious bound, and overthrew Cadoche. Thanks to the wonderful instinct of these generous animals, they cleared his body without touching it, but the two wheels of the vehicle passed over his breast.

The road was lonely and dark; too dark for M. Ravelard to distinguish their wearer among the dingy rags piled on the earth behind his rapidly retreating carriage. The patachon himself had lost all control over the horses, and, at first, the bourgeois thought of nothing but the danger of an overturn; when the animals were quieted, the beggar was left far behind.

"I hope that you did not knock him down?" said M. Ravelard to his driver, who was still trembling with fear and anger.

"No, no," said the patachon, whether sure of what he affirmed or not. "He fell to one side. It was his fault, the old rascal! but the horses never touched him, and he was not hurt, for he made no noise. He will get off with the fright, and it will be a good lesson to him."

"But suppose we went back to see?" said M. Ravelard.

"Oh! no, no, sir, these people will make you a lawsuit for a scratch. He would think nothing of pretending that his head was broken, to make you give him plenty of money. I came across such a fellow once who had the patience to stay forty days in bed to make my citizen indemnify him for forty days' loss of work. And he was no more sick than I."

"Such people are very cunning!" said M. Ravelard. "Nevertheless, I had rather never have a carriage than to run over any one whosoever. Another time, my boy, you must stop short rather than have such a dispute; it is dangerous."

The patachon, who wished to get rid of the consequences of the affair, whipped up his horses to get the quicker away. He was not free from terror and remorse, and swore between his teeth till the end of the journey.

The miller, with Lemor, Grand'-Marie, and M. Tailland the notary, came at this moment out of the mill. Lemor was resolved to leave the next morning, and on this his last evening, lost in a tender melancholy, and inattentive to what was said around him, he was contemplating the beauty of the heavens, and the reflection of the stars in the water. The miller, gloomy and depressed, exerted himself to be polite to the notary, who had been drawing up a will for a farmer of the neighborhood, and had stopped on his way past the mill, to light his cigar and the lanterns of his cabriolet. Grand'-Marie was just explaining to him how, by taking another direction, he might avoid a long piece of stony road, and Grand-Louis was assuring him that by driving slowly over this same place, or walking and leading the horse, he would find the rest of the way better. The notary, when his comfort was concerned, was what is called in that part of the country extremely *fafiot;* an untranslatable word, which implies a man at once very dawdling and very precise. He had just lost a quarter of an hour which he might have spent in repose at home, in learning how he might avoid fifteen minutes' slight fatigue.

He thought that walking and leading his horse would be still more fatiguing than enduring the jolts in his cabriolet, but that of the two the best was bad, and promotive of indigestion.

"Come," said the miller, who would not allow his melancholy to overpower his natural kindness and obliging temper, "follow me slowly up the hill on foot, and I will drive your equipage to the top. When we have passed the vineyards, you will have firm sand the rest of the way."

While good-naturedly fulfilling the office of groom, Grand-Louis was soon obliged to turn the cabriolet almost into the ditch, to make way for M. Ravelard's carriage, which dashed by at full speed. M. Ravelard, preoccupied with his encounter with the mendicant, neglected to answer the miller's friendly "good-evening."

"And so he does not know me because he is in his carriage?" said the latter to Lemor, who had followed him; "money, money! thou turnest the world as the water does my mill-wheel. This cursed patachon will smash everything, if he goes at this rate over our flints. No doubt his head is full of wine and his pouch of money. I know not which intoxicates most. Ah! Rose! Rose! they will give thee the poison of vanity to drink, and soon, perhaps, thou also wilt forget me. Yet she seemed almost to love me this evening! Her eyes were full of tears when they parted her from me. I shall speak to her no more — perhaps she will regret me — Ah! how happy I might be were I not so unhappy!"

The miller's reflections were interrupted by a start of the horse whom he drove. He leaned forwards, and saw some light-colored object in the road. The horse obstinately refused to advance, and the shadows were so heavy just there, that Grand-Louis was forced to alight, to see whether he had stumbled upon a pile of stones or a drunken man.

"Oh, the devil, good uncle!" said he, on recognizing the tall stature and the wallet of the mendicant. "Last night it was on the edge of a ditch, which may do, but to-night it is right across the ruts! You seem to have a fancy for this place, but it makes you a poor bed. Come, wake up, and come and sleep at the mill; you will be better off there than under the horses' hoofs."

"This man is dead!" said Henri, raising the beggar in his arms.

"Oh! don't be afraid; he has often gone through this death; it is a common thing. Nevertheless, our gossip has a strong head for drink, but on a fête day one is apt to take more than is wise; and as they say of wine, there is no friend so faithful who will not betray you at last. Come, let us leave him at the foot of this tree, we will take him up again as we go back."

Lemor touched the mendicant's wrist.

"If I did not feel a faint motion of the pulse," said he, "I would swear that he was dead. How! are not poverty, old age, and desolation enough, but a degrading vice must drag this wretch beneath the very feet of men! And yet he, too, is a man!"

"Bah! you are severe, like a true water-drinker! Who was it that said the poor had need to drink away the remembrance of their woes? I have certainly heard it somewhere."

Just as Lemor and the miller were about to leave Cadoche for a time, he gave a deep groan.

"Ah! well now, uncle," said the miller, with a smile, "are you better now?"

"I am dead!" feebly answered the mendicant. "Take pity on me — finish me! I am in too much pain!"

"It will go off, uncle. Some cold water and a good bed —"

"They have crushed me, they drove over my body," resumed the old man.

"That is not so impossible!" said Lemor.

"Oh, he always talks in this way," returned the miller, who had witnessed the painful vagaries of intoxication too often to be much troubled by them. "Let us see, Father Cadoche; have you really met with any accident?"

"Yes, the carriage, the carriage — on my chest, my stomach, my arms!"

"Unfasten one of the lanterns from the cabriolet, and bring it here," said the miller to Lemor. "Now, it lightens one corner and makes another darker; when we have it close under his nose, we shall soon see whether sickness or wine ails him."

"No, not wine, not wine," murmured the mendicant. "They have killed me, crushed me like a poor dog — I shall die of it. May the good God, and the Holy Virgin, and all good Christians take pity on me, and avenge my death!"

Lemor brought the lantern. The beggar's face was livid; his garments were too old and dirty to show a rent or a stain, more or less; but on removing the rags which covered his breast, there appeared on his gaunt side marks of burning red, where the iron-banded wheels had passed over him. Yet the skin was unbroken, the ribs did not seem fractured, and his breathing was still free. He could even describe his accident, and had sufficient strength to pour forth all the imprecations and oaths of vengeance that rage and despair could suggest to him, against the rich man in his carriage, and the vile mercenary who outdid the insolence and cruelty of his master.

"Thanks to God!" said the miller, "you are not dead yet, poor Cadoche; and we will hope that you may not die this time. See, the right wheel went into the ditch; here is the track of it. It was that saved you; the carriage, by tipping that way, bore as little as possible upon you. It was a miracle that it did not turn over entirely."

"I did my best to make it!" said the beggar.

"Ah, well, your malice served you a good turn, uncle. They could not crush you, and we will make them pay well for this; not poor M. Ravelard, who will be even more sorry than you, but that cursed boy!"

"And the days that I shall lose!" whined the mendicant.

"Ah! faith! you gained more money, perhaps, in strolling about, than the rest of us by our labor. But you shall be assisted, Father Cadoche; we will make a collection for you, and I will give you, myself, your weight in grain; don't be worried. When there is trouble we must not let fear make it worse."

So speaking, the good miller, with Lemor's help, placed the mendicant in the cabriolet, and brought him back at a foot pace, avoiding the flints with the utmost care. M. Tailland, who was climbing the hill very slowly, for fear of losing his breath, was amazed to see them return; and, on being acquainted with the cause, readily lent his cabriolet, yet not without some concern on account of the delay that the accident would occasion him, and the fatigue that he should have in going up the hill again, when he was already near the top. He turned back, nevertheless, to see if he could aid his friends at the mill in succoring poor Cadoche.

The old man fainted when they laid him on the miller's own bed. They held vinegar to his nose.

"I should like the smell of brandy better," said he, when he began to recover; "it is more wholesome."

They brought him some.

"I should rather drink it than smell it," said he, "it is more strengthening."

Lemor opposed this. After such an accident, this burning draught might and would create a terrible access of fever. The mendicant insisted. The miller would have dissuaded him, but the notary, who had been too studious of his own health not to have some medical prejudices, pronounced that water, under such circumstances, would be fatal to a man who, perhaps, had not swallowed a drop for fifty years; and that alcohol, being his ordinary drink, would only do him good; that fright was his only serious injury, and that he would recover his senses with the excitement of a dram. The mill-wife and Jean, like all peasants, believed in the infallible virtues of wine and brandy in all cases, and declared, with the notary, that the poor man must be satisfied. The opinion of the majority prevailed; and while they were gone to get him a glass, Cadoche, really parched with the thirst excited by his great suffering, carried the bottle hastily to his lips, and swallowed at one draught more than half the contents.

"Too much, that is too much!" said the miller, stopping him.

"How, nephew!" answered the beggar, with the dignity of a patriarch assuming the legitimate exercise of his authority; "thou measurest my portion in thy house? Thou art niggardly of the succor necessary in my condition?"

This unjust reproach overcame the prudence of the good and simple-hearted miller. He left the bottle beside the old man, saying:

"Keep it for another time, but that is enough for the present."

"Thou art a good kinsman and a worthy nephew!" said Cadoche, who appeared suddenly resuscitated by the brandy; "and if I must die, I had rather it should be at thy house, because thou wilt give me a suitable funeral. I always liked a fine funeral! Hearken, nephew, mill-boys, notary! I take you all to witness, that I direct my nephew and heir, Grand-Louis of Angibault, to have me carried to the grave neither more nor less honorably than they will soon doubtless carry old Bricolin of Blanchemont — who will survive me but short time, although he be the younger — but who got his legs burned when — Ah! ah! now then, say, must he not have been a fool to have had his *pins roasted* for the sake of money that had been left with him? To be sure, there was some of his own with it, in the iron pot!"

"What is he talking about?" asked the notary, who had seated himself by a table, and was not sorry to see the mill-wife preparing tea for the sick man, intending to take a hot cup himself, as protection against the evening mists of the Vauvre. "What old stories is he telling of his roasted pins and his iron pot?"

"I believe he is out of his head," replied the miller. "At any rate, were he neither sick nor fuddled, he is old enough to dote, and the adventures of his youth are more on his mind than those of the present. It is the way of age. How do you feel, uncle?"

"I feel much better since that little drop, though thy brandy is devilish weak! Could any one have played me such a trick as to mix water with it for economy? Hearken, nephew! if thou refusest me anything during my sickness, I will disinherit thee!"

"Ah, yes, to be sure, by way of talking sense!" said the miller, shrugging his shoulders. "You had better try to sleep, Father Cadoche."

"Sleep, I? I have no wish to," replied the mendicant, raising himself on his elbow, and glancing around with sparkling eyes. "I know very well that I am done for, but I will not die on my side, like an ox. Ugh! I feel something heavy in my stomach, there on my heart, as if there were a stone in its place. It itches — it hurts! Grand'-Marie! make me some bandages. Nobody here takes any notice of me, as if I were not a rich old uncle!"

"May not his ribs be crushed in?" said Lemor. "It may be that which oppresses his heart."

"I know nothing about it, nor does any one here," said the miller; "but we could easily send for the doctor, who is doubtless still at Blanchemont."

"And who will pay for the doctor?" said the beggar, who was as miserly as vain of his pretended wealth.

"I will," answered Grand-Louis, "unless he will come for humanity's sake. It shall never be said that a poor devil perished at my house for want of all the help that could be given to a rich man. Jean, take Sophie and go quick for M. Lavergne."

"Take Sophie?" chuckled Cadoche. "Thou sayest that from habit, nephew! Thou hast forgotten that Sophie is stolen."

"Sophie stolen?" said the mill-wife, turning hastily round.

"He is wandering," replied the miller. "Don't mind him, mother. Say, Father Cadoche," added he, turning to the mendicant, and lowering his voice, "how did you know that? Cannot you give me some news of my beast and the thief?"

"Who can know such things?" returned Cadoche, with a cunning look. "Who discovers thieves? Not the police, they are not bright enough! Who could ever say who they were that burned Father Bricolin's legs, and carried off his iron pot?"

"Ah! say now, uncle," replied the miller, "you are always speaking to us about those legs; you must think of them a great deal. For some time, whenever I meet you, you return to it; and to-night there is an iron pot added to your story. You never told me about that."

"Do not make him talk!" said his mother; "thou wilt increase his fever."

The mendicant had really a high fever. Every time that his hosts' backs were turned, he swallowed furtively a mouthful of brandy, and adroitly replaced the bottle beneath his bolster on the further side of the bed. Each instant he appeared stronger, and it was wonderful to see how, at his advanced age, his iron frame supported the effects of an injury which would have crushed any other person.

"The iron pot!" said he, gazing at Grand-Louis with strange eyes, which affected him with a sort of inexplicable terror. "The iron pot! that is the best of the story, and I will tell it you."

"Tell us, tell us, Father Cadoche, this interests me!" said the notary, who was attentively watching him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WILL.

THERE was," resumed the beggar, "an iron pot, an old ugly iron pot, which did not look like any thing at all — but one must not judge by looks! In this pot — close sealed it was, and heavy, oh, how heavy! — there were 50,000 francs belonging to the old lord of Blanchemont, whose granddaughter is now at the Bricolin farm. And besides, old Father Bricolin, who was a young man then — it is now just forty years ago! — had laid away in this pot 50,000 francs of his own, which he made by a good speculation in wool — that was the time! — on account of the army contracts. The lord's deposit and the farmer's profits were all in fine, handsome louis d'ors of twenty-four francs each, with the head of our good king Louis XVI. — we called them *toad's eyes*, ~~because~~ of the round shield — I always loved that coin! They say it loses in exchange, but I say it gains. 23 francs 11 sous are always worth more than a wretched Napoleon of 20 francs. All this was pell mell. Only, as the farmer loved his louis for themselves, (that is the way to love money, children!) he had marked all his with a cross, to distinguish them from his lord's, when he should have to restore them. He followed the example of his master, who had marked his with a plain bar, to amuse himself, so they said, and to see if any were changed. The mark was there — it is there still — not one is missing — on the contrary, some are added! —"

"What the deuce is he prating to us about?" said the miller, looking at the notary.

"Hush!" answered the latter. "Let him talk. It seems to me that I begin to understand. So that," said he to the beggar —

"So that," resumed Cadoche, "he had put the iron pot in a hole in the wall, at the chateau of Beaufort, and had it plastered up. When the chauffeurs came after him, — you are not to think that these people were all vagabonds! Some were poor, but some were rich; faith! I know them very well! Some are yet living, and honored by men. There were among us — "

"Among you?" cried the miller.

"Hold your tongue!" said the notary, forcibly pressing his arm.

"I mean to say that there were among them," resumed the mendicant, "an advocate, a mayor, a curate, a miller — perhaps a notary also — eh! eh! M. Tailland, I do not say that for you; you were hardly born then; nor for thee, nephew; thou wouldst have been too simple to have done such a thing — "

"In short, the chauffeurs took the money?" said the notary.

"They did not take it, that was the queerest of it. They broiled and frizzled that poor goose of a Bricolin's feet — that was horrid, superb to see!"

"You saw it, then?" said the miller, quite unable to contain himself.

"Oh no!" returned Cadoche, "I did not see it; but one of my friends, that is, a man who chanced to be there, told me all this."

"Very well," said the miller, tranquillized.

"Now take your cup of tea, Father Cadoche," said Grand'-Marie, "and do not chatter so much; you will hurt yourself."

"Go to the devil with your hot water!" replied the mendicant, pushing back the cup; "I detest your slops! Let me tell my story; I have had it long enough at heart; I want to tell the whole of it once before I die, and I am always interrupted!"

"True enough," said the notary; "this morning you wanted to tell it in the arbors, and everybody turned away, saying 'Let us be off! Here is Father Cadoche beginning his story of the chauffeurs!' But it amused me, and I would willingly have heard the rest. So go on."

"You are to understand," said Cadoche, "that this man of whom I speak to you, and who was there, somewhat against his will, was a poor peasant, whom they had led away; and then, when fear took him, and he showed signs of drawing back, they threatened to blow his brains out if he did not mount the horse they brought him, and which was shod with shoes turned backwards like those of the others, so as to leave a false trail on their retreat — and when my man was there, and saw that he must do like the rest, he began to hunt and rummage everywhere to find the money. He had rather do that than help to roast poor Bricolin, for he was not a bad man, this fellow I am talking about. Fact! this job did not please him, and was horrible for him to see — it was ugly — the patient howling loud enough to split one's ears, the wife fainting, those cursed legs struggling in the fire that I think I always see — there has not been a night since that I have not dreamed of them! Bricolin was a very strong man then; he stiffened himself so that an iron bar, which was in the midst of the fire, was twisted by his feet — ah! I had no hand in it, I swear before God! When they forced me to hold the towel over his mouth, the sweat ran down my face, cold as hoar-frost — "

"Your face?" said the amazed miller.

"The man's who told me all this. Then our man took a good chance to slip one side, and began to search, search, from the top of the house to the bottom, striking with a pickaxe against all the walls, to see if they sounded hollow, and smashing everything right and left as the others did. But now what should happen but that he stepped into a little stable for pigs, saving your presence, and found himself all alone! Ever since that time I have loved pigs, and raised one every year. He knocked, listened, — it sounded hollow. He looked round him. I was all alone! He worked at the wall, tore it away, and found — guess what? The iron pot! We knew that this was Father Bricolin's strong box. The locksmith who had fastened it had blabbed, and I knew at once that this was our flower-pot! And it was so heavy! All one! My man found the strength of an ox in his arms and his heart. He got off safe and sound with his iron pot, and left the country by daybreak, without saying good-by to the others. He was never seen again in that district. He played a high game, you see! The chauffeurs would have made an end of him mighty quick, if they had caught him. He walked day and night without stopping to eat or drink till he came to a great wood, where he buried his pot, and slept, I don't know how many hours. I was so tired with carrying such a load! When I grew hungry, I was greatly puzzled. I had not a single sous, and I knew that in my 100,000 francs every louis was marked! I had looked at them; I could not keep myself from doing so! I saw that this cursed mark would be recognized, as the police were already informed of the money. To scratch it out would have been worse. And then, if a poor devil like the one I speak of had offered to change a louis d'or for a loaf of bread at a baker's, that would have aroused suspicion. There was only one thing to do: he turned beggar. The police were not so efficient in those times as now, for none of the chauffeurs left the country, or were punished. Beggary is a good trade when one knows how to set about it. I have picked up something, without ever depriving myself of anything. My man was not the fool to call in a locksmith to seal up the iron pot; he buried it right in the middle of a wretched cabin of straw and mud, which served him for a house, and which he built for himself in the heart of the wood. For forty years nobody has tormented him, because nobody envied his fate, and he has had the pleasure of being richer and prouder than all those who despised him."

"And of what use was his gold to him?" said Henri.

"He looked at it once a week when he returned to his cabin, where he kept all the money that he received in alms. He kept on his person only what he chose to spend in tobacco and brandy. He had a mass said from time to time, to acquit himself towards the good God, for the service he had received, and so he drew himself out of the scrape with much order and wisdom. He is not foolish enough to let go a single piece of his treasure. It would not excite suspicion now that the story is forgotten and the prosecution abandoned, but it would make people think him rich, and then they would give him nothing. There, children, that is the story of the iron pot. What do you think of it?"

"It is superb!" said the notary; "and well worth knowing!"

The narration was followed by a deep silence. Each one looked at the others, divided between surprise, terror, contempt, and a sort of odd desire to laugh mingled with all these emotions. Cadoche, exhausted by his garrulity, had fallen back on his pillow. His pale face took a greenish tinge, and his long, stiff beard, still black enough to darken his clay-colored countenance, made him absolutely frightful. His hollow eyes, which lately darted flames, while delirium and intoxication loosened his tongue, seemed to sink in their sockets, and take the glassy shine of death. His strongly-marked face, large, thin, aquiline nose, and compressed lips, might have been handsome in his youth, and were indicative, not of a ferocious nature, but of a singular mixture of avarice, cunning, timidity, sensuality, and even of good-nature.

"Uf!" said the miller, at last, "has he had the nightmare, or have we just been hearing a confession? Must we call upon the doctor or the priest?"

"Upon the mercy of God!" said Lemor, who had watched with more attention than the others the change in the face of the beggar, and the difficulty of his respiration. "I am much deceived, or this man has but a few moments to live."

"I have few moments to live?" said Cadoche, making an effort to rise. "Who says so? the doctor? I do not believe in doctors. To the devil with them all!"

He leaned toward the bedside, and finished the bottle of brandy; then turning back, he was seized with a sharp pain, and gave a cry.

"My heart is thrust in," said he, struggling energetically against his suffering. "Very likely I shall not get over it. And if I should never return to my house, what will become of everything? And who will take care of my poor pig? He is used to live on the bread that is given me, and which I carry to him every week. I have a little neighbor-girl who takes him out to the pastures. The coquette! She casts sweet eyes on me — she hopes to inherit my estate. But she hopes in vain. Behold my inheritor!"

And Cadoche, with a solemn air, extended his hand towards Grand-Louis.

"He has always been better to me than anybody else; he is the only one who has treated me as I deserve; who has given me a bed to sleep on, and wine, and tobacco, and brandy, and meat, instead of their crusts — which I never touched! I have always practised one virtue — gratitude! I have always loved Grand-Louis and the good God, because they have been good to me. So now I will make my will in his favor, as I have always promised him. Grand'-Marie, do you believe I am so sick that it is time to make my will?"

"No, no, my poor man!" said the mill-wife, who, in her angelic trustfulness, had taken the mendicant's story as a sort of dream. "Do not make your will; they say it is unlucky, and makes one die."

"On the contrary," said M. Tailland, "it does one good; it is a comfort; it is enough to restore one from death."

"In that case, notary," said the beggar, "I will try the remedy. I love what I own, and I want to be sure that it will pass into good hands, and not into those of the little jades who pay their court to me, and who shall have nothing of me but the bouquet and ribbon from my hat, to make themselves fine o' Sundays. Notary, take your pen and scribble me down this in good terms, and without omitting anything:

"I give and bequeath to my friend Grand-Louis, of Angibault, all that I possess: my house, situated in Jeules-bois, my little potato-plot, my pig, my horse —"

"Your horse?" said the miller. "Since when have you had a horse?"

"Since yesterday evening. It is a horse I found as I was walking."

"May it not, perhaps, be mine?"

"Thou hast said the word. It is thy old Sophie, who is not worth her shoes."

"Your pardon, uncle!" said the miller, half pleased, half vexed. "I think a great deal of Sophie; she is worth more than — many people! The devil! you were not over particular when you robbed me of Sophie! and me, who would have trusted you with the key of my mill! Do you see this old hypocrite?"

"Be silent, my nephew, you speak foolishly," returned Cadoche gravely; "it would be a pretty thing if an uncle might not have the use of his nephew's mare! What is yours is mine, since, by my intentions and my will, what is mine is yours."

"Oh! ah, to be sure!" replied the miller; "*bequeath* me Sophie, uncle, bequeath away, I accept that much. It is lucky, all the same, that you had not time to sell her. Old rogue!" he muttered between his teeth.

"What dost thou say?" asked the beggar.

"Nothing, uncle," said the miller, who perceived a sort of convulsive rattle about the old man. "I say you did very well, if it was your pleasure to ask charity on horseback!"

"Have you done, notary?" resumed Cadoche, with a failing voice. "You write very slowly. I feel myself sinking. Hurry yourself, lazy scrivener!"

"It is done," said the notary. "Do you know how to sign?"

"Better than you!" retorted Cadoche. "But I do not see. I must have my spectacles and a pinch of snuff."

"Here they are," said the mill-dame.

"That is good," resumed he, after having inhaled a pinch of snuff with great relish, "that revives me. Come, I am not dead yet, though I suffer like one possessed."

He cast his eyes over the will, and said, "Ah! you have not forgotten the iron pot *and its contents?*"

"Certainly not," answered M. Tailland.

"You did well," replied Cadoche, with a mocking expression, "though all that I told you about it was a story to make fools of you!"

"I was sure of it!" said the miller, joyously. "If you had found that money, you would have restored it to the owners. You have always been an honest man, uncle — though you did steal my mare. But that was one of your jokes; you would have brought her back to me! Come, do not sign this nonsense; I have no need of your little things, and they might give pleasure to some poor body; besides, you may have some relation, whom I would not wrong of your last sous."

"I have no relations, I have buried them all, thank God!" answered the mendicant; "and as to the poor — I despise them! Give me the pen, or I curse thee!"

"Well, well, amuse yourself!" said the miller, handing him the pen.

The beggar signed; then pushing away the paper with apparent horror—

"Take it away," cried he, "take it away! it seems to me it will kill me!"

"Shall I tear it?" asked Grand-Louis, quite ready to do so.

"No! no!" replied the mendicant, with a last effort of will; "put it in thy pocket, my boy, maybe thou wilt not be sorry for it. Ah, so! where is the doctor? I want him to come and make a quicker end of me, if I must suffer long in this way!"

"He is coming," said the miller's mother, "and the curate with him; for I sent for them both."

"The curate?" said Cadoche; "what for?"

"To give you some consoling words, my old man. You have always had some religion, and your soul is as precious as anybody's else. I am sure the curate will not refuse to take the trouble to bring you the sacraments."

"So that is my state?" replied the dying man with a deep sigh. "If that is the case — no nonsense! and the curate may go to all the five hundred devils, although he is a good man after all — when he is sober. But I don't believe in curates. I love the good God, and not the priests. The good God gave me money, the priest would have made me return it. Let me die in peace! Nephew, thou promisest me that this wretched patachon shall die under the stick?"

"No! but to thrash him soundly."

"Enough talk," said the mendicant, stretching out his livid hand. "I wished to die talking, but I can no more — Ah! I am not so sick as you think, I am going to sleep, and perhaps thou wilt not inherit so soon, my nephew!"

He let himself fall back, and after an instant, there was a sound as of boiling water in his chest. His face flushed, then turned ashy pale; he groaned for some minutes, opened his eyes with a frightened look, as if death had appeared to him in perceptible form, and suddenly, half smiling as if he had recovered hope of life, he gave up the ghost.

In the death of even the worst of men there is always something solemn and mysterious which impresses the religious soul with respect and silence. There was a moment of awe, and even of melancholy, at the mill, when the mendicant Cadoche had expired. Notwithstanding his vices and absurdities, notwithstanding even the extraordinary confession they had just heard, and which the notary alone really believed, the miller and his mother had a sort of friendship for the old man, arising from the good they were accustomed to do him; for if it is a true saying that we hate people in proportion to the wrong we do them, the opposite maxim should be also received.

The mill-dame knelt by the bed in prayer. Lemor and the miller also prayed in their hearts the Dispenser of all mercy not to abandon the immortal and divine soul which had made its earthly passage under the abject form of this wretch.

The notary alone went quietly back to his cup of tea, after coolly pronouncing, "*Ite, missa est, Dominus vobiscum.*"

"Grand-Louis," said he afterwards, calling him out of the room, "thou must go at once to Jeu-les-bois, before the news of this death reaches there. Some vagabond like himself might overturn his hovel, and steal the egg."

"What egg?" said the miller. "His pig, his change of rags?"

"No, but the iron pot."

"Fantasy, M. Tailland!"

"Go and see, nevertheless! And then thy mare?"

"Ah, my old servant! I forgot—you are right. She is well worth the journey, for her good heart and our old friendship. We are nearly of an age, she and I. I will go, but what if he only jested with me about that too? He was an old rogue!"

"Go, go, I tell thee — no laziness! I believe in this iron pot. I believe in it *firm as iron*, as they say here."

"But tell me then, M. Tailland, is it really of any value, that bit of paper that you scribbled over for your amusement?"

"I answer for its being in good form, and it may render thee possessor of one hundred thousand francs."

"Me? but you forget that if the story is true, half of it belongs to Mme. de Blanchemont, and the rest to Bricolin."

"Still another reason for haste. Thy heart has accepted the charge of restitution. Go and seek it. When thou hast rendered this service to M. Bricolin, it will go hard but he gives thee his daughter."

"His daughter! Do I pretend to his daughter? Can his daughter think of me?" said the miller, blushing.

"Good, good! Discretion is a virtue, but I saw you dancing together to-day, and I know why the father parted you so roughly."

"M. Tailland, put all that out of your mind. I am going. If there is really a treasure, what shall I do with it? Is not a declaration before a magistrate necessary?"

"To what purpose? The formalities of justice were invented for those who have no justice in their hearts. What good would it do to dishonor the memory of an old rogue who has succeeded for eighty years in passing for an honest man? And thou hast no need to prove that thou art not a thief, everybody knows it. Thou wilt restore the money and all will be right."

"But if the old man has relations?"

"He has none; and if he had, wouldst thou make them inherit what does not belong to them?"

"True, true, I am all confused by what has just taken place. I will go mount my horse."

"That will not be convenient for bringing back this famous iron pot, which is so heavy, so heavy! Are the roads tolerable down there?"

"Certainly. From here you go to Transault, thence to Lys-St.-George, and then to Jeu. It is all cross-road, and newly repaired."

"In that case, take my carriage, Grand-Louis, and be quick."

"Well, and you?"

"I will sleep here, and wait for you."

"The devil take me but you are a fine fellow! And what if the beds are poor, for you are rather delicate?"

"So much the worse! One night is soon over. Besides, we cannot leave thy mother alone with the corpse, it is too dismal. For thou must take thy mill-boy. Two are none too many to carry money. Thou wilt find loaded pistols in the pockets of my cabriolet. I often have things of value to carry, and never travel without my arms. Come, be off! Tell thy mother to make me some more tea. We will talk as long as we can, for this corpse annoys me."

Five minutes later, Lemor and the miller were on the road to Jeu-les-bois, through the dark night. We will give them time to arrive there, and return to see how matters went on at the farm during the time of their journey.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DISASTER.

GRANDMOTHER BRICOLIN was very impatient at the delay of the miller. She was far from thinking that her messenger would never return to claim his promised reward, and the reader will easily understand that the mendicant forgot, at the moment of his death, to give the message which had been intrusted to him. At last, weary and discouraged with waiting, she returned to her old spouse, after having assured herself that the maniac was still roaming in the warren, absorbed, as usual, in rumination, and that the quiet echoes of the valley were no longer awakened by her ill-boding cries. It was about midnight. A few unsteady voices still rose as their owners left the cabarets, and the dogs at the farm, as if recognizing familiar tones, disdained to bark.

M. Bricolin, urged on by his wife, who desired the instant execution of the deed drawn up by Marcelle, had, not without pain and terror, delivered to the latter the pocket-book containing two hundred and fifty thousand francs. Marcelle was quite unmoved on receiving this venerable object. It was so dirty that she took it with her finger ends, and, tired of thinking of an affair in which she had been so much disgusted by the cupidity of others, she threw it into a corner of Rose's secretary. She had accepted this prompt payment for the same reason that had impelled the purchaser to make it, namely, to bind him, and secure the destiny of the young girl by preventing any possibility of retraction.

She desired Fanchon, at whatever hour Grand-Louis should present himself, to take him into the kitchen, and come to call her. Then she threw herself — dressed as she was — upon her bed to rest, without sleeping, for Rose was still much excited, and seemed never weary of blessing her, and talking to her of her happiness. Meanwhile, the miller not arriving, and every one's strength being exhausted by the emotions of the day, towards two in the morning all at the farm were in deep sleep. One of the family must be excepted — the maniac, whose brain was wrought to a paroxysm of intolerable fever.

M. and Mme. Bricolin had talked long together in the kitchen. The former having nothing more to fear, and feeling chilled by all the water he had drank, had returned to his mug, which he filled from hour to hour by tipping with an unsteady hand an enormous jug that stood beside him, filled with purple, foaming wine. It was unpressed wine, the most heady of his vintage, a detestable beverage, but preferred by a Berrichon to any wine in the world.

His wife, seeing that neither the satisfaction of being proprietor of Blanchemont, nor the smiling projects of his opulence, could brighten his dull eye, or loosen his fixed jaw, had repeatedly advised him to go to bed. He always replied, "Directly. I am just going," but without quitting his chair. At last, after having been to see that Rose as well as Marcelle was sleeping, Mme. Bricolin could endure it no longer, and went to bed and to sleep, calling vainly to her husband, who had not force enough left to stir, and did not now even hear her. Completely intoxicated and prostrated — as a man always is who has made an effort to sober himself suddenly, and has amply repaid himself afterwards — the farmer, his hand on his mug, and his head sunk on the table, made a lullaby of portentous snores for the wearied sleep of his wife, who was in bed in the next room, with the door open.

An hour had scarcely passed away, when M. Bricolin felt himself suffocating, and ready to sink with faintness. He could hardly rise. It seemed to him that there was no air to breathe, that his sharp eyes could discern nothing, and that he was struck with apoplexy. Fear of death lent him strength to grope to the door, which opened on the court; the candle had burned out in its tin socket. Having succeeded in opening the door, and descending the steps without falling, the farmer stared vacantly around him, without comprehending anything of what he saw. An extraordinary blaze of light which filled the court forced him to cover his eyes with his hand, for the passage from darkness to this burning glare gave him a new vertigo. At length, when the air had dissipated the fumes of wine, the species of asphyxia which had overpowered him gave way to a convulsive shudder — at first mechanical and merely physical, but soon produced by inexpressible terror. Two high jets of fire, flashing through clouds of smoke, rose from the roof of the barn.

Bricolin thought himself in a bad dream; he rubbed his eyes, he shook his whole body: still these spires of flame leaped towards the skies, and increased with frightful rapidity. He would have cried "Fire!" but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He tried to return to the house from which he had wandered a few steps, without knowing where he went. He saw on his right torrents of flame pour from the stables, upon his left another jet of fire crowning the turrets of the old chateau; and before him — before him his own house, illumined within by a terrible glare, and the door which he had left open behind him vomiting black volumes of smoke, like the mouth of a forge. All the buildings of Blanchemont were the prey of a magnificently-arranged conflagration. They had been set on fire in more than ten or twelve different places, and what was most ominous in the first act of this strange drama was, that the silence of death brooded over all. No one as yet perceived the disaster which Bricolin, bereft of strength and will, contemplated in fearful solitude. All the inhabitants of the new chateau and of the farm had passed from the sleep of fatigue or intoxication to the asphyxia produced by the smoke. The crackling of the fire alone began to be heard, and the brittle noise of the falling tiles upon the pavement. Not a cry, not a wail, responded to these sinister monitions. It seemed as if the conflagration had found no food save deserted buildings or corpses. M. Bricolin wrung his hands, and stood mute and motionless, as if oppressed with nightmare, and making vain internal efforts to awaken himself.

At last a piercing scream, a woman's scream was heard, and Bricolin, as though delivered from the spell that weighed upon him, replied, by a wild outcry, to this appeal of the human voice. Marcelle had been the first to perceive the danger, and now darted out, with her child in her arms. Without seeing Bricolin or the rest of the fire, she placed the boy upon a pile of hay in the middle of the court, and saying to him, in a firm voice, "Stay there, do not be afraid!" she hastily reëntered the house, notwithstanding the suffocating smoke which filled it, and ran to the bed of Rose, who had remained as if paralyzed, incapable of following her.

Then, endowed by her courage with the strength of a man, the slender little blonde took her young friend in her arms, and heroically carried a body, much heavier and larger than her own, to the place where she had left her child.

Bricolin had thought at first of nothing but his crops and his cattle, and had run towards the barns; but at the sight of his daughter, he remembered that he had a family, and, sobered for the second time that night, and more thoroughly now than before, he flew to the assistance of his mother and wife.

Happily the fire had caught only the roofs, and the lower story, inhabited by the Bricolins, was still untouched, with the exception of Rose's wing, which, being very low, and in the neighborhood of a heap of dry faggots, burned rapidly.

Mme. Bricolin, springing from bed, was in instant possession of her bodily powers and her presence of mind. With the assistance of her husband and Marcelle, she carried out her father-in-law, who, imagining himself in the hands of the chauffeurs, cried with all his might, "I have nothing more! Do not kill me! Do not burn me! I will give you everything!"

Little Fanchon resolutely helped Mother Bricolin, who was soon ready to help others. The servants and workmen were aroused, and none perished; but all this took considerable time, and when help came from the village, and a line was at length formed, it was too late; the water seemed to increase the intensity of the fire, by raising burning fragments and throwing them to a distance. The enormous quantity of grain and fodder heaped in the out-houses, blazed with the rapidity of thought. The ancient wood-work of the old buildings seemed to ask nothing better than to burn. Nearly all the larger animals refused to come out, and were stifled or burned. Nothing was preserved but the body of the new chateau, from which the tiles fell off, and whose new wood-work was left naked, charred, and raising its black skeleton over the yet white walls of the apartments.

Fire-engines in the country are a tardy and useless resource, often ill-contrived and ill-managed, and when they arrived on this occasion, their hose burst at the first trial, for want of use or good keeping. The firemen and villagers, nevertheless, succeeded in subduing the fire, and saving the habitation and furniture of the Bricolins. But the loss of everything else was immense and complete. The entire wing which Rose and Marcelle had inhabited, all the barns and out-houses, all the cattle and all the agricultural implements, were destroyed. The roof of the old chateau was still burning, but unheeded, because its strong, bare walls could defend themselves. One only of its towers was cracked from top to bottom by the heat. The others were preserved from final ruin by the huge ivy which clasped them round.

The day began to dawn as the miller and Lemor came out from the mendicant's wretched cabin. Lemor carried the iron pot, and Grand-Louis held the bridle of his dear Sophie, who had greeted his approach with a friendly whinnying. "I have read Don Quixote," said he, "and I am now in the condition of Sancho recovering his ass. A little more, and I should follow his example, embrace my old Sophie, and make her a fine speech."

"Grand-Louis," said Lemor, "if you can resist this temptation, do you feel none to look and see whether this iron pot contains gold or pebbles?"

"I did lift the cover," said the miller; "something shines inside, but I am in great haste to quit before daylight, before the inhabitants, if any there be in this desert, observe my motions, and take me for a thief. I tremble with emotion and pleasure, like a man who has well conducted another's business; but I am cool, nevertheless, as one who inherits nothing for himself. File off, file off, Master Henri! Did you put my pickaxe back into the carriage? Wait while I take one more look. The hole is well filled up, nothing shows; let us be gone! We will rest in some wood, if our beasts are too tired to go on."

The notary's horse had been three mortal leagues on the full trot, and often galloping over rough and hilly roads, and was indeed so tired on their return, that when our travellers arrived at the height of Lys-St.-George, they were obliged to stop to breathe him. Sophie, whom they had fastened behind the cabriolet, and who was not accustomed to move at so mad a rate, was covered with sweat. The miller's heart was touched. "We should be merciful to the beasts," said he; "and then I should be sorry to have our good notary lose a valuable horse for his probity and wisdom in this business. As to Sophie, no iron pot is worth her; this old servant ought not to play the part of the earthen vessel. Here is a pretty shady spot, where neither man nor beast are stirring. Let us stop here. I am sure there is a bag of oats in the carriage-box, for M. Tailland thinks of everything, and is not the man to go to sea without biscuit. We will breathe here for a quarter of an hour, and we shall all be the fresher to start again. Unluckily, when giving the *key of the fields* to my uncle's pig, (inherit him who will!) I forgot to steal some of his crusts of bread, and my stomach feels so hollow, that, but for wronging Sophie, I would willingly share her oats. It seems to me that my part as a miser's heir is well begun. I am starving beside my treasure."

While chatting thus according to his custom, the miller unbridled the horses, and gave them their breakfast — the notary's in the bag that held the oats, and Sophie's in his own long blue cotton cap, which he very facetiously tied round her nose.

"It is odd how light my heart feels now," said he, bringing out the iron pot from under the bushes. "Do you know, M. Lemor, that my happiness lies in here, within this pot, if the gold is not all on top, and the bottom filled with copper? I am afraid it is too heavy to be all gold. Come now, help me count it."

It was soon counted. The pieces of old gold were rolled up in dirty scraps of paper, in sums of one thousand francs each. On opening them, Lemor and the miller saw the marks of which the mendicant had spoken. There was a cross upon each louis of Father Bricolin's fortune, while those belonging to the deposit of the lord of Blanchemont bore a simple bar. At the bottom they found about three thousand francs in various silver coins, and even a handful of copper, the mendicant's last collection.

"This," said the miller, throwing it back into the pot, "is my uncle's fortune, your humble servant's inheritance, the widow's mite which this old dotard did not scruple to collect, and which shall return to the widow and the orphan, I promise you. Who knows if some of this be not the fruit of theft? Seeing how my uncle (peace to his soul!) filched Sophie from me, I am not over confident in the purity of his bequest. Ah, what pleasure I shall have in giving alms — I, who am so often deprived of this satisfaction! I shall have a princely pleasure! Do you know that in this country one can save the lives and secure the comfort of three families with three thousand francs?"

"But you forget the rest of the deposit, Grand-Louis. Think that with this large sum, of which Mme. de Blanchemont has surely no personal need, you enable her also to confer much happiness."

"Oh! trust her for making it fly in that direction! But there is something besides that pleases me! This little hoard which M. Bricolin will be so glad to receive from me! It will not find a very Christian use in his hands, but it will mend up my affairs, which were nearly ruined last night."

"That is to say, my dear Louis, that you can now aspire to the hand of Rose?"

"Oh, never think it! If the fifty thousand francs belonged to me, that could be splendidly arranged! But Bricolin knows how to calculate better than you. He will say, 'Here are five hundred pistoles of mine, which Grand-Louis has done only his duty in bringing me. What is mine is not his; so I have fifty thousand francs the more in my pocket, and he remains with his mill as before.'"

"And will he not be astonished and touched by an integrity of which he would doubtless have been incapable?"

"Astonished, yes; touched, no. But he will say, 'This lad may be useful to me.' Honest people are very necessary to those who are not so. And he will pardon me my sins, and restore me his custom, of which I think a great deal, since it enables me to see Rose, and speak to her every day. So you see that without deluding myself, I have good reason to be happy. I felt so proud and so happy yesterday evening when I was dancing with Rose, when she seemed to love me! Well! I recover that happiness, without troubling myself as to the morrow. That is much: go to, fine Uncle Cadoche! thou didst not guess what consolation lay for me in thy iron pot! Thou thoughtest to make me rich, and thou makest me happy!"

"But, my dear Louis, since you take to Marcelle a sum equal to that she wished to sacrifice for you, you may now accept the concessions that she offered to Bricolin?"

"Me? Never! Do not speak of such a thing. It wounds me. I shall be no longer banished from the farm, and that is all I want. See how bright and handsome this treasure is! how much comfort for distress, and ease for pain, lie in it! Money is good, after all,

M. Lemor, confess it! Here, in the hollow of my hand, are the lives of five or six poor children!"

"Friend, I see only what is really there — old Bricolin's tears, and cries, and torture; and the beggar's avarice, and stupid, degraded life entirely consumed in the trembling contemplation of his theft!"

"Ugh! you are right," said the miller, shocked, and casting back his handful of gold into the iron pot. "What crimes, anxieties, and lies, what cowardice, and fear, and suffering are here! You are right, money is a vile thing; and we here, who are secretly looking at it, and counting it, we are like two robbers armed with pistols, and in fear of being surprised by other robbers, or collared by the police. Out of my sight, accursed!" cried he, replacing the cover, "and let us go, friend! Joy to us, this is not ours!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A RUPTURE.

AS they approached the valley of the Vauvre, our travellers remarked, in looking towards Blanchemont, an immense sheet of heavy smoke, whitened by the rising sun.

"Look, now!" said the miller; "see what a fog there is over the Vauvre this morning, especially on the side where we both always want to look! It troubles me; I do not see the pointed roofs of my good old little chateau, which, from every side, as I am riding about, serve as guiding-points to my thoughts."

In about ten minutes the smoke, which had been held down by the weight of the morning mists, suddenly broke away at the foot of the valley, and Grand-Louis, abruptly stopping the notary's horse, said to his companion:

"It is singular, M. Lemor,—I don't know whether my eyes are blurred this morning, but, look my best, I cannot see the red roof of the new building below the turrets of the old chateau! Yet I am very sure it can be seen from here; I have stopped here more than an hundred times, and I distinguish the trees around it. Ah, but look! the old chateau is all changed! The turrets look lower to me. Where the devil is the roof? Thunder crush me! there is nothing left but the gables! Stay, stay! What is that red spot beside the farm-house? It is fire! yes, fire! and all those black things?—M. Lemor, you know I told you, when we were at Jeu-les-bois, that the sky was reddened, and that there was a fire somewhere. You persisted that it was the burning of pastures, but I knew there was no furze in that direction. Look! I am not dreaming! the chateau, the farm, all is burned!—But Rose! Rose!—Ah, my God! And

Madame Marcelle! and my little Edward! and Mother Bricolin! my God! my God!"

And the miller, whipping his horse furiously, galloped on towards Blanchemont, without stopping to think whether his old Sophie could follow or not.

As they approached, the signs of the disaster became only too certain. Soon they heard of it from those they met on the road, and although they were assured that no one had perished, both, pale and agitated, urged to the utmost their horse, who seemed to them to creep.

When they reached the foot of the terrace, as the poor animal, panting, and covered with foam, could only walk up the ascent, they stopped before Pauline's, and sprang from the cabriolet to run faster. At this moment Marcelle appeared before their eyes, at the door of the cabin. She was pale, but calm, and there were no vestiges of fire on her garments, for she had been occupied through the night in attending upon others, without uselessly endeavoring to extinguish the flames. Lemor was near fainting with joy at seeing her; he took her hand without the power of speech.

"My boy is here, and Rose is at the curate's," said Marcelle. "She has met with no accident, she is scarcely ill, she is happy in spite of her parents' consternation. Nothing is lost in all this but money. It is a slight thing compared to the joy that awaits her—"

"What? how?" said the miller; "I do not understand."

"Go and see her, my friend, nothing prevents you, and learn from herself what I will not be the first to tell you."

Grand-Louis remained a moment stupefied, then ran. Lemor entered the cabin with Marcelle, and while Pauline and her husband looked to the horses, he went to the bed where Edward was sleeping. The last of the Blanchemonts was sweetly reposing upon the pallet of the poorest peasant of his domains. He possessed not even a shelter, and the hospitality of indigence was all he could now claim.

"Then he ran no danger?" said Lemor, kissing his little hands, moist with gentle warmth.

"This little creature has good stamina," said Marcelle, with some pride. "He has not been ill, he woke in the midst of suffocating smoke, and was not afraid. He has passed the night with me, helping and comforting others; and, notwithstanding his weakness and ignorance of misfortune, his cares, his caresses, and simple words, have been like an angel's to me, and to all the timorous souls who were trembling and crying around us. And I dreaded emotion and fright, for his health! An heroic spirit animates this delicate frame. Lemor! he is a blessed child, whom God marked, at his birth, for noble poverty!"

The child awoke at Lemor's caresses, and recognizing him this time more by his tenderness than his features,—

"Ah, Henri!" said he, "why wouldst thou not speak to me when thou *madest believe Antoine?*"

Marcelle was beginning, with quiet fortitude, to explain to her lover the new catastrophe in which the fire had involved the remainder of her fortune, when M. Bricolin, his face convulsed, his clothes in rags, and his hands severely burned, rushed into the cabin.

On recovering from his first terror, the farmer had worked, with desperate energy and courage, to save his cattle and his crops. An hundred times he had nearly been a victim to his frantic eagerness; and he had abandoned his vain hopes only on finding himself in the midst of a heap of ashes. Then discouragement, despair, and a sort of fury seized upon his feeble brain. He was almost raving; and rushed distractedly towards Marcelle, with confused ideas and embarrassed words.

"Ah, here you are at last, madam!" said he, in a broken voice. "I have been looking for you through all the village, and I did not know what had become of you. Hark you, Mme. Marcelle! — I have something very important to say to you — you may look calm, but all this misfortune falls upon you; all this damage is at your cost!"

"I know it, M. Bricolin!" answered Marcelle, with some impatience; for the sight of this avaricious man was not consoling to her just now.

"You know it?" replied Bricolin, in a sort of rage, "and I know it, too! It is your business to rebuild the houses and replace the stock at Blanchemont."

"And with what, if you please, M. Bricolin?"

"With your money! Have you not money? Did I not give you enough?"

"I have none now, M. Bricolin. The pocket-book was burned."

"You let *my* pocket-book burn? the pocket-book that I *intrusted* to you?" cried Bricolin, exasperated, and striking his forehead with his fists. "How could you be so silly, so stupid, as not to save the pocket-book, since you had plenty of time to save your son?"

"I saved Rose, too, M. Bricolin. I carried her out of the house in my own arms. Meanwhile, the pocket-book was burned. I am not sorry for it."

"It is not true — you have it!"

"I swear to you solemnly that I have not. The secretary where it was, all the furniture of that chamber, was burned while the people were being saved. You know this very well; I have told you before, for you asked me about it; but you did not hear me, or you do not remember."

"Ah, yes, I remember," said the dismayed farmer, "but I thought you were deceiving me."

"And why should I deceive you? Was not the money mine?"

"Yours? Then you do not deny that I bought your estate from you yesterday evening, that I paid you for it, and that it belongs to me?"

"What should make you think that I was capable of denying it?"

"Ah! pardon me, pardon me, madam! I have not my right head!" said the farmer, subdued and calmed.

"So I see," said Marcelle, in a contemptuous tone, to which he paid no attention.

"It is all the same, the repairs of the buildings and the stock are at your cost," resumed he, after a short silence, in which his ideas became confused anew.

"One of two things, M. Bricolin," said Marcelle, shrugging her shoulders. "Either you have not bought the estate, and it is my business to repair the damage, or I have sold it to you, and have nothing to do with it; choose!"

"True!" said Bricolin, again sinking into a new stupor. Then he resumed quickly, "Oh, yes! I have fairly and fully bought and paid; you cannot deny that. I have your deed and receipt, which I took good care to save! My wife has it in her pocket."

"Then you are easy, and I too; for I have also the duplicate copy of our deed in my pocket."

"But you ought to pay for the damage!" cried Bricolin, with dull fury; "I did not buy your estate without buildings and stock. The loss is at least fifty thousand francs!"

"I know nothing of that, but the disaster took place after the sale."

"It was you who set fire to it!"

"Very probably!" said Marcelle, with cool disdain, "and I threw in the price of my estate to amuse myself!"

"Pardon, pardon me, I am ill!" said the farmer; "to lose so much money in one night!—But it is all one, Mme. Marcelle, you owe me an indemnity for my misfortune. I have always had misfortune with your family. My father was tortured by the chauffeurs, and robbed of fifty thousand francs of his own, for a deposit which your grandfather left in his charge."

"The consequences of that misfortune are irreparable, since your father lost his health, both of mind and body, by it. But my family is perfectly innocent of the crime of the robbers, and as to the loss of your money, it was largely made up by my grandfather."

"True, he was an excellent master! You should do the same; you ought to compensate me!"

"You think so much of money, and I so little, M. Bricolin, that I would satisfy you if I were able. But you forget that I have lost everything, even to the pitiful sum of two thousand francs which I received from the sale of my carriage, and my very clothes. My boy cannot even say at this moment that he owns so much in the world as the garments which cover him, for I carried him naked from your house; and if this woman whom you see had not taken him in with holy charity, and clothed him with the poor garments of one of her own children, I should be forced to beg from you a blouse and a pair of wooden shoes for him. Leave me then quiet, I beseech you; I have strength to bear my own misfortunes, but your rapacity disgusts and wearies me."

"Enough, sir!" said Lemor, who could no longer restrain himself. "Go — leave this lady in peace!"

Bricolin did not hear this apostrophe. He had sunk upon a chair, only so far alive to Marcelle's utter destitution as it deprived him of all hope of extorting anything from her. "So," cried he despairingly, striking his fists upon the table, "I thought I had made a good bargain last night; I had bought Blanchemont for two hundred and fifty thousand francs; and now this morning I have lost fifty thousand francs, in buildings and cattle! That makes the estate," said he, sobbing, "cost me three hundred thousand francs, as you would have had it!"

"It does not seem to me to be my fault, or that I profit by it," coldly answered Marcelle, whose indignation fell on seeing Lemor's, and who controlled herself to oblige him to be calm.

"And that is all your misfortune, M. Bricolin?" simply asked Pauline, astonished at all that she had heard. "Truly, I should think myself well off! This poor lady has lost everything; you are still rich, as rich as you were yesterday evening, and you ask something of her? That is queer enough! If Blanchemont costs you, fire and all, only three hundred thousand francs, it is still mighty cheap. I know many who would have given more."

"Pray what are you talking about?" replied Bricolin. "Hold your tongue! you are but a fool and a gossip."

"Thanks, sir!" said Pauline; and turning proudly to Marcelle — "it is all the same, madam," she said; "since you have lost all, you may stay with me as long as you wish, and share my black bread. I will not reproach you, and will never send you away."

"Listen, sir!" said Lemor, "and blush!"

"You — I don't know who you are!" returned Bricolin, in a rage. "Nobody here knows you; you look as much like a miller as I like a bishop. But you shall not go far, my lad! I will send the police to demand your papers, and if you have none, we shall see! This fire was plainly kindled on purpose, everybody will swear to that, and the king's attorney is here to make out a warrant. You are friends with a man who owes me a grudge, and that's enough!"

"Ah! this is too much!" said the indignant Lemor; "you are the meanest of wretches, and if you do not leave this place instantly, I will find means to make you."

"Stay!" said Marcelle, seizing Lemor's arm. "Have pity on this man, he has lost his senses! Be indulgent to misfortune, however base it show itself; follow my example, Lemor; my patience is equal to my situation."

Bricolin did not hear. He held his head between his hands, and groaned like a mother who has lost her child.

"And I who would never insure, because it was too dear," cried he, in a lamentable whine; "and my oxen, my poor oxen, who were so fat and handsome! A lot of sheep worth two thousand francs, that I would not sell at the fair of St. Christopher!"

Marcelle could not restrain a smile, and her lofty good sense controlled Lemor's indignation.

"At any rate," said the farmer, suddenly rising, "your miller shall not have my daughter!"

"In that case, you shall not have my estate. The deed is clear, and the condition positive."

"We will go to law!"

"As you please."

"Oh, you cannot go to law! That needs money, and you have none. And then you would have to restore me the payment, and how would you do that? Besides, your fine condition is null; and as for the miller, I am going to begin by having him arrested and put in prison; for I am sure it is he who set fire to my house, out of revenge for my treatment of him yesterday. All the village will testify to how he threatened me — and this gentleman here — enough! Help! help! the police!" and he rushed out in absolute frenzy.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CHAPEL.

ANXIOUS for the miller and for Lemor, who might be disagreeably, if not dangerously, involved by the consequences of Bricolin's blind revenge, Marcelle induced her lover to conceal himself, and Pauline was just going to warn Grand-Louis to do the same, when suddenly all the people on the terrace, who were standing in groups and talking over the late disaster, were seen to re assemble and run towards the farm.

"I am sure they have done it already!" cried Pauline, weeping. "They have laid hands already on poor Grand-Louis!"

Lemor, hearkening only to his friendship and courage, left the hut and flew towards the terrace. Marcelle, frightened, followed him, leaving Edward to the care of her hostess's eldest daughter.

When they entered the court of the farm, Marcelle and Lemor were shocked at the sight of the tottering piles of blackened ruins, the ground soaked with water, which looked like ink, and the crowd of weary, wet, burnt, and spectre-like laborers, who were even now preparing for new fatigue. The fire had just broken out afresh in a little isolated chapel, situated between the farm-house and the old chateau.

This new accident seemed incomprehensible; for this building had remained untouched till now, and if a spark had fallen upon it during the conflagration, the fire would not have smouldered so long among the dried peas contained there. Yet the flames broke from the interior, as if an implacable hand had carried its daring so far as to strive before all eyes, and in broad day, to destroy the last building on the estate.

"Let the chapel burn!" cried M. Bricolin, foaming with rage; "run after the incendiary! He must be there, he cannot be far. It is Grand-Louis, I am sure! I have proof! Look in the warren! Surround the warren!"

M. Bricolin was little aware that while he was thus directing public feeling against the miller, the latter, forgetful and careless of what was passing without, was at the curate's, kneeling beside the large chair in which Rose had been placed, and receiving from her lips the confession of her love, and the news of the engagement entered into by her father. In the general confusion, the curate, and even his housekeeper, had mingled with the busy laborers; her grandmother alone remained with Rose; and the young lovers, lost in the purest rapture, had entirely forgotten the agitating events taking place around them.

A circle was formed about the chapel, and the engines were directed towards it, when M. Bricolin, who had advanced to the door, shrunk back horrified, and fell against one of his farm-boys, who could scarcely support him. This chapel, which had formerly been attached to the old chateau, still, to an antiquarian eye, possessed beautiful remains of Gothic carving. But so old an edifice could not long sustain the intensity of the heat. The flames burst through the windows, and their delicate ornaments were beginning to crack off, when the half-open door was abruptly pushed from within, and the maniac came out, a small lantern in one hand, and a wisp of burning straw in the other. She was slowly retiring, after having given the finishing touch to her work of destruction; she walked gravely on, her eyes bent on the ground, seeing no one, and entirely occupied with the enjoyment of her long-contemplated and coolly-executed vengeance.

An over-conscientious policeman went straight up to her, and stopped her by taking hold of her arm. Then first perceiving the crowd who surrounded her, she thrust her blazing straw into the face of the officer, who, surprised at this unexpected defence, was forced to let her go. Instantly recovering her impetuous agility, with a look of hatred and fury, and uttering confused imprecations, she darted into the chapel, as if to hide herself. Several attempted, but no one dared to follow her. She crossed the flames with the ease of a salamander, and climbed the little spiral staircase which led to the roof. There she appeared at a skylight, and was seen to urge on the fire, which gained too slowly to satisfy her, and which soon surrounded her on every side. They tried in vain to wet the roof with the engines. It had been lately repaired, and covered with zinc. The water ran off, and scarcely penetrated at all. Thus the fire consumed the interior, and the unfortunate Bricoline, slowly burning, must have endured extreme torture. But she appeared not to feel it, and was heard singing a dancing tune, which she had loved in her youth, to which she had doubtless often danced with her lover, and which recurred to her memory at the moment of death. Not a groan was heard from her; deaf to the cries and supplications of her mother, who wrung her hands, and was only withheld by force from rushing to her, she sang for a long time; then appearing at the window once more, she recognized her father.

"Aha, M. Bricolin!" cried she to him, "*these days of ours* are fine times for you!"

These were her last words. When the fire was subdued, her whitened bones were found on the pavement of the chapel.

This fearful death completely distracted Bricolin, and destroyed the courage of his wife. They thought no longer of arresting any one, and during the entire day they were wholly forgetful of Rose, Mother Bricolin, and her old husband. Shut up at the curate's, M. and Mme. Bricolin would see no one, and emerged only when they had exhausted together all the bitterness of their grief.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONCLUSION.

MARCELLE had enough presence of mind to foresee that it would be dangerous for Rose, ill and shaken by so many emotions, to hear of the deplorable end of her sister. She suggested to the miller to put her immediately into the notary's cabriolet, and take her to his mill, with her grandmother and the infirm old man, from whom the good woman would not be separated. She herself, leaning upon Lemor, who carried Edward in his arms, followed them at a little distance.

For several days Rose had a return of fever every evening. Her friends did not leave her for an instant. They concealed from her the funeral of the beggar Cadoche, who was buried with all the ceremony he desired, and they left her in ignorance of the death of the maniac till she was able to endure the intelligence; but it was long before she knew all the shocking circumstances attending it.

Marcelle consulted M. Tailland upon the value of the deed drawn up with Bricolin.

The notary's opinion was not favorable. Marriage, being a matter of public institution, could not be made a clause in a deed of sale. In the case of illegal clauses, the sale remains good, and the said clauses are *reputed unwritten*. Such are the terms of the law. M. Bricolin knew them before the signature of the deed.

At the end of three days the farmer appeared at the mill, pale, haggard, having lost half his flesh, and even the desire to drink himself into better spirits. He seemed incapable of anger; still, as they did not know what his intentions might be in coming to Angibault, and as Rose was yet very weak, Marcelle trembled lest he should recall her with abusive words or manners. Everybody was uneasy, and they all went out to meet him, so as to prevent his entrance unless he announced pacific intentions.

He began by coldly intimating to his mother that she was to bring his daughter home immediately. He had hired a house in the village of Blanchemont, and was about to commence the work of rebuilding. "But my being ill lodged," said he, "is no reason for my being deprived of the society of my daughter, nor for her refusing her services to her mother. Only an unnatural child would do so." So speaking, Bricolin cast surly looks on the miller. It was plain that he wished to withdraw his daughter quietly from his house, feeling that he could afterwards give vent to his rancor, and accuse Grand-Louis, at need, of having carried her off.

"That is right, that is right," said Mother Bricolin, who had undertaken to reply. "Rose has several times asked to return to her father and mother, but as she is yet ill, we have prevented her. I think she may be well enough to-day to go with thee, and I am ready to accompany her with my old man, if thou hast a place for us. Only give Mme. Marcelle time to prepare the child for the surprise and pleasure of seeing thee, and do thou come to my chamber, Bricolin; I have something to say to thee in private."

The old woman led him to the room which she shared with the mill-dame. Marcelle and Rose had been installed in the miller's. Lemor and Grand-Louis slept, rejoicingly, in the hay-loft.

"Bricolin," said the good woman, "thou wilt have great expense with these repairs. Where wilt thou get the money?"

"What is that to you, mother? you have none to give me," answered Bricolin, roughly; "I am short, just now, it is true, but I shall borrow. I shall have no trouble in finding credit."

"Yes, but with heavy interest, as is the custom, and then when you come to repay, you are already involved in new expenses that are necessary and unavoidable. That is a constraint and an incumbrance, and one never knows how to get away from it."

"Well, what would you have me do? Can I stow my next year's harvest in my shoe, and shelter my cattle under a broom?"

"What will all that cost?"

"The Lord knows!"

"But about —?"

"From forty-five to fifty thousand francs, at the least; fifteen to eighteen thousand for the buildings, as much for the stock, and as much for what I lose of my crops and of the year's profits!"

"Yes, that makes about 50,000 francs. That was just my estimate. Well! Say, Bricolin, if I gave thee that sum, what wouldst thou do for me?"

"You?" cried Bricolin, his eyes recovering their accustomed fire; "have you, then, savings unbeknown to me, or are you doting?"

"I am not doting. I have 50,000 francs in gold, which I will give thee, if thou wilt let me marry Rose as I like."

"Ah! here it is! always the miller! All the women are crazy after that bear; even old souls of eighty."

"Good, very good! Jest, but accept."

"And where is this money?"

"I have given it to Grand-Louis to keep," said the old woman, who knew, that if her son saw it, he was capable of forcibly snatching it from her hands in his ecstacy.

"And why to Grand-Louis, and not to me or my wife? Then you mean to make him a gift of it, if I do not act according to your will?"

"The money of others is safe in his hands," said the old woman, "for he had this without my knowledge, and brought it to me when I thought it lost forever. It is my husband's, you understand; but since you have had him set aside in law, and we have sunk our property for the benefit of the survivor, it is at my disposal."

"But this is a recovery, then? Impossible! you are making a fool of me, and it is too good in me to listen to you!"

"Listen!" said his mother; "it is a queer story."

And she told her son all the story of Cadoche and his legacy.

"And the miller brought you back this money, when he might have said nothing about it?" cried the farmer, quite confounded. "Really, that was very honest, yes, really very *handsome*, on his part! He must have a present."

"There is but one present to make him: Rose's hand, since she has already gifted him with her heart."

"But I will give no dowry!" cried Bricolin.

"That is understood: who asked thee for it?"

"Show me this money!"

Mother Bricolin took her son to the miller, who showed him the iron pot and its contents.

"And by this means," said the farmer, dazzled, and as it were resuscitated, by the sight of so much coined gold, "Mme. de Blanchemont is not absolutely destitute?"

"Thanks to God!"

"And to thee, Grand-Louis!"

"Thanks to Father Cadoche's whim."

"And thou, what dost thou inherit?"

"Three thousand francs, of which a third is destined to Pauline, and the rest to the establishment of two other families near me. We will all work together, and receive the profits in common."

"That is stupid!"

"No, it is useful and just."

"But why not keep these thousand crowns for wedding presents for — thy wife?"

"They would smell of stolen money; and even if it were only the produce of charity, would you, who are so proud, like to have Rose wear dresses that were paid for with copper coins, given as alms to a beggar?"

"There would be no need of telling where they came from! Well, then, when shall the wedding be, Grand-Louis?"

"To-morrow, if you will."

"Let the banns be published to-morrow, and give me the money to-day; I have a use for it."

"No, no! no, no!" cried his mother. "Thou shalt have it on the wedding-day. Fair play, fair play, my boy!"

The sight of the gold had revived M. Bricolin. He sat down to table, drank with the miller, embraced his daughter, and, when about half-seas over, remounted his nag, to go and set his masons to work.

"In this way," said he to himself, "I still have Blanchemont for 250,000 francs, and even for 200,000, since I give no dowry with my last daughter!"

"We too, Lemor, we must build," said Marcelle to her lover, when Bricolin had gone. "We are rich; we have enough to raise a pretty, rustic cottage, where *our* child shall have a good education; for thou wilt be his preceptor, and the miller will teach him his trade. Why should he not be at once an active workman and an educated man?"

"And I depend upon beginning with myself," said Lemor. "I am very ignorant; I must study evenings. I am mill-boy — I like to be mill-boy — and I will be that in the day-time. What fine health this life will give our Edward!"

"Well, Mme. Marcelle," said Grand-Louis, taking Lemor's hand, "you who told me, the first time you came here — eight days ago, nor more nor less — that your happiness would consist in having a little house, neat and clean, with a thatched roof, and climbing vines like mine, a simple, easy life like mine, a son, who should be busy and not over-dull, like me! — And all this here, upon our river Vauvre, which has the honor to please you, and beside us, who are good neighbors!"

"And all this in common," said Marcelle, "for I take it no otherwise!"

"Oh! impossible! your part, at present, is much greater than mine."

"You calculate ill, miller," said Lemor; "thine and mine, between friends, is as great an enormity as to say that two and two make five."

"Then I am rich and learned!" returned the miller, "for I have Rose's heart, and you will talk with me every day! Did not I tell you, M. Lemor, that there would be a miracle for me, and that all would come right? But I did not reckon the while upon Uncle Cadoche!"

"What makes thee dance so, *alochon?*" said Edward.

"My child," answered the miller, lifting him high in his arms, "while throwing my nets, I have caught, in the clearest of the water, a little angel, who has brought me happiness; and, in the muddiest, an old devil of an uncle, whom I shall perhaps be able to get out of purgatory!"

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